

ETHICS AND FICTION

Moral Philosophy and the Role for Literature

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requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy*

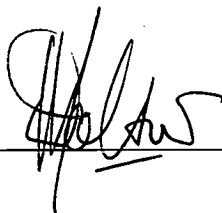
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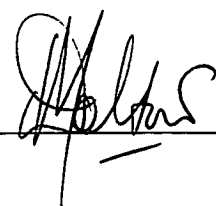


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ABSTRACT

Can imaginative literature make a substantive contribution to ethical reflection? If so, what is the nature of this contribution and what is its value? What role can literature play in moral enquiry? Can literature help moral philosophy to shed light on moral questions? Can literature furnish moral knowledge that is unaccounted for, or unaccountable, in the traditional methods of philosophical reflection? In addressing these questions, my aim in this thesis is to construct a comprehensive and critical account of the contribution to ethics that imaginative literature (particularly in the form of the novel) can make within and alongside traditional moral philosophy.

First, I consider the character of moral philosophy, conceived as a normative enterprise, and review some systemic limitations of normative ethics. I then examine the arguments of some prominent philosophers concerning literature's role in helping to identify and address these issues.

Second, in examining the aspects of literature which render it valuable to ethical reflection, I consider the formal distinctions between literature and traditional moral philosophy, and investigate the unique role of literary devices. The arguments here provide the foundation for my proposition that the value of the connection between philosophy and literature depends crucially on the distinction between them.

The third chapter deals with literature's ability to illustrate, challenge and test a moral perspective, and so help to reveal and illuminate features of the ethical life that cannot be apprehended via traditional philosophical reflection alone. To illustrate this expansion of the philosophical method, I consider aspects of Kantian ethics and

utilitarianism in light of a select number of literary works. I argue that sympathy is crucial to the realisation of genuine ethical ends. The argument is that seeing the world through the eyes of others enables one not only to understand their motives and actions, and to consider one's own responses to similar circumstances, but that, in doing so, one can uncover the extent to which a moral stance comports with one's own ethical convictions, how that stance can accommodate these convictions, or how these convictions need modifying in light of that stance. Because fiction both exercises and confers a number of important freedoms, fictional literature is an ideal tool for the exploration of ethical concepts. Moreover, as the apotheosis of extended, connected fictional narratives, it is further argued that the novel is the ideal literary mode for this exploration. However, if literature is such a valuable supplement to philosophical reflection, why can we not treat literature itself as a form of moral philosophy?

As an adjunct to philosophical reflection, literature can enhance our moral understanding in a manner that does justice to us as complex beings in complex conditions, and in a way that traditional philosophical reflection alone cannot. Literature has the power not only to move us, but to help us shape our lives and make reality out of ethical reflections. However, as literature's ability to make this contribution is a consequential feature of its form, there is sufficient reason not to treat literature as moral philosophy, which requires its own very different approach. I conclude by arguing that cooperation between literature and moral philosophy can enhance moral understanding to an extent unachievable via either form of discourse alone, and that this enhancement flows directly from the distinction between the two.

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For any errors and omissions, however, I do claim full ownership.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ethics and the Role for Literature.....	2
An Apparent Dichotomy.....	3
Four Possible Connections	5
The Argument.....	11
The Moral Philosophy Enterprise	16
The Entry Point for Ethical Reflection	19
 The Form and Content Connection.....	 32
Targeting the Issues.....	32
Philosophical and Literary Discourse.....	36
A Vital Role for Literature.....	46
Language and Perspective in Philosophy and Literature.....	50
The Role of Plot.....	70
 The Expansion of Methods.....	 86
Kant and a Passage from Conrad.....	87
Utilitarianism and a Passage from Conrad.....	108
Utilitarianism and a Dostoyevskian Dilemma.....	113
Instructive Reminders.....	125
The Exemplification and Range of Moral Concepts	130
 The Scope of Fiction and the Ascendancy of the Novel	 140
The Utility of Fact and the Utility of Fiction.....	140
Reality and the Free Scope of Fiction.....	155
Historical Facts and the Freedom of Fiction	163
The Role of Schematic Thought Experiments.....	168
The Novel's Ascendancy in Morally Relevant Exemplification	177
 Can Literature be Philosophy?.....	 188
The Four Possibilities	189
The First Proposition: Moral Philosophy as Literature.....	190
The Third Proposition: Moral Philosophy Feeds Literature	212
The Fourth Proposition: Literature feeds Moral Philosophy	224
The Second Proposition: Literature as Philosophy.....	229
 Bibliography.....	 243

ETHICS AND THE ROLE FOR LITERATURE

Morality is a subject which interests us above all others: We fancy the peace of society to be at stake in every decision concerning it; and 'tis evident, that this concern must make our speculations appear more real and solid, than where the subject is, in a great measure, indifferent to us.

*David Hume*¹

Can imaginative literature make a substantive contribution to ethical reflection? If so, what is the nature of this contribution and what is its value? What role can literature play in moral enquiry? Can literature help moral philosophy to shed light on moral questions? Can literature furnish moral knowledge that is unaccounted for, or unaccountable, in the traditional methods of philosophical reflection?² In addressing these questions, my aim is to construct a comprehensive and critical account of the contribution to morality that imaginative literature (particularly in the form of the novel) can make within and alongside moral philosophy.

In this thesis I argue not only that literature can furnish a valuable supplement to ethical thought, but that it can also contribute autonomously

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge (Ed.), (Oxford: 1965), p. 456

to our individual understanding of the ethical life. I further argue that attention to the connections between the two enterprises promises fruitful outcomes, namely, a deeper understanding and richer conception of morality than can be achieved by philosophical reflection alone. At the crux of my case I argue that the value of this relation depends on the distinction between the two enterprises, and that the contribution that literature, particularly the novel, offers to moral philosophy is a consequential feature of its form.

An Apparent Dichotomy

In an essay on morality and the novel, D. H. Lawrence wrote, 'The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment.'³ Compare Lawrence's evaluation of the descriptive role of literature with the essentially prescriptive function that Socrates assigns to moral philosophy in Plato's *Republic*: 'We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.'⁴

The respective roles assigned to literature and moral philosophy by Lawrence and Socrates imply a dichotomy between two divergent enterprises. At one end of the cognitive spectrum, there is imaginative literature, with its descriptive, contextual role of indirectly mirroring the personal, social and historical milieu from which a narrative emerges and *in* which its characters and their actions and attitudes exist - albeit in a fictional sense. At the other end, there is moral philosophy, including normative ethics, with its traditional aim of seeking rational justification for general and abstract moral principles to guide the conduct of human beings in relation to one another and to all else that shares their life world. While the descriptive process of literature reveals how an agent does, or *might*, relate to his or her life world, the normative function of moral philosophy prescribes how he or she *ought* to relate to it.

² My attention to these questions was first drawn by John Norris in his "Philosophy and Literature" in *Cogito* (vol. 11, no 1, April 1997), p. 16

³ D. H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel' in *Phoenix*, (London: 1936), p. 527

⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, various editions and translations, sec 352d

The distinction is further illuminated by noting that in normative ethics, prescriptive and evaluative judgements are typically central, and overtly expressed with a focus on generality, on universally applicable rules or formulae. On the other hand, in most imaginative literature evaluative judgements are typically only implied in the text, embedded in aesthetically shaped language and literary devices, rather than overtly expressed. And while philosophy deals with the abstract, imaginative literature is concerned with the concrete individual, and the path that he or she has chosen to navigate through the messy particularities of life.⁵ In a discussion with Bryan Magee concerning the relation between literature and philosophy, Iris Murdoch enumerates further substantive differences between them:

In her discussion of the differences, Murdoch draws the following distinctions: literature does many things, philosophy does one thing (has one aim); literature is natural, philosophy is counter-natural; literature arouses emotion, philosophy tries to eliminate emotion appeal; literature is indirect, philosophy is direct; literature has no problem to solve, philosophy seeks to solve a few technical and abstract problems; literature is concerned with aesthetic form, philosophy does not aim at formal perfection.⁶

How these differences bear on literature's possible contribution to ethical reflection will emerge in the course of this thesis. However, the existence of even substantial differences does not imply that there is no connection between literature and philosophy, or that the connection between them cannot be valuable. At the very least, they share an interest in the same subject matter. To a greater or lesser degree, each has an interest in, and seeks to understand and articulate its understanding of, human existence. But this is a truism; at best a trivial observation that if a thing is about life,

⁵ I hold to one side the debate over this point sparked by Hare's remark that '...no work of fiction can be about a concrete individual.' (See his 'Universalisability,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55, 1954/5, p. 310) In chapter 4 I defend against Hare my position that rather than obfuscate philosophical features of moral significance, literature can alert us to their existence. I take the term 'messy particularities' from C.A.J. Coady in his "Literature, power and the recovery of philosophical ethics" in Adamson, Freadman and Parker (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory*, (Cambridge: 1998), p. 13.

be it prescriptive or descriptive, performative or evaluative, then it shares at least something with anything else that is about life.

However, assuming that there is a substantive connection that transcends merely a shared interest in a general topic, where does it lie, and what is its value to ethical reflection? Moreover, if we take seriously the proposition that art is pointless unless it can furnish something not attainable by other means, then what can literature provide that cannot be obtained through philosophical reflection alone.⁷

Four Possible Connections

Consider D. D. Raphael's conception of the possible relations between literature and philosophy. In 'Can Literature be Moral Philosophy?'⁸ he examines four possible meanings of the thesis that there is a positive connection between literature and moral philosophy. He expresses these meanings in the form of four propositions: first, a work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature; second, a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy; third, moral philosophy can feed literature; and, fourth, literature can feed moral philosophy.⁹

On the first proposition, that a work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature, it is generally accepted that a number of works of philosophy possess literary merit without compromising their status as works of 'serious' philosophy. Many of Plato's dialogues qualify in this regard, as does, for example, Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*. These are excellent examples of how

⁶ Bryan Magee, *Men of Ideas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 242

⁷ 'Unless art delivers values that life without art cannot, it is pointless.'

Edgar Sleisin, *Art and Freedom*, (Urbana: 2003), p. 1. In this thesis I leave to one side questions concerning definitions of art and what counts as art. For the purposes of my argument, I assume that, insofar as it is a work of imaginative literature, the novel counts as a mode of literary art. I am concerned with what makes the novel, as a form of literary art, valuable to ethical reflection. I defend the normative nature of my enquiry later in this chapter.

⁸ D. D. Raphael, 'Can Literature be Moral Philosophy?' in *New Literary History* vol. XV, 1983-1984, pp. 1-12

⁹ I will examine in greater detail each of these propositions in chapter five. The brief account which follows is intended merely to establish the overall context of this project.

philosophical arguments can be communicated in a literary mode.¹⁰ These are Raphael's examples of works of moral philosophy that qualify as works of literature or possess literary merit. While the Berkeley text is not strictly a work of *moral* philosophy, I take Raphael's point. But a text with more overtly moral themes, such as Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* may perhaps serve as a more apt example.

Two important questions need to be addressed to the first proposition. One, by reference to what criteria may we ascribe literary merit? Two, does the mere fact that a work of philosophy possesses literary merit qualify it as a work of literature? A response to the second question, informed by the answer to the first (both of which I address chapter 5), needs a viable definition of literature, one that covers all forms of discourse, including philosophical prose. If it is true, as I will argue, that the significance to ethical reflection of the connection between literature and philosophy lies in the *distinction* between the two enterprises, then answers to these questions have a crucial bearing on how to account for the value of this connection.

These answers also have a crucial bearing on Raphael's second proposition, that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy. To value literature for the distinctive contribution that it offers to philosophical reflection is to acknowledge a distinction between literature and philosophy, and to accord importance to the distinction itself. But, as I propose in the chapters that follow, to accept the second proposition is to reduce one form of discourse to another form of discourse, and there are good arguments that the power of the connection between philosophy and literature would be severely attenuated thereby.¹¹

On Raphael's third proposition, that moral philosophy can feed literature, it is clear that material in numerous distinctly philosophical perspectives can, and often do, provide rich thematic material for works of

¹⁰ Raphael, *op. cit.* p. 2. I will examine Raphael's arguments concerning what features endow works such as these with specifically literary merit in chapter five.

¹¹ To a certain extent this argument constitutes the crux of my thesis. The final section of chapter five is devoted to a discussion of this proposition.

fiction. The thematic preoccupations of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*,¹² for example, are clearly responsive to the utilitarian thought that characterised moral debate in nineteenth-century Britain. As a literary exploration into the concept of ends justifying means, William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*¹³ offers a convincing and somewhat damning portrayal of utilitarianism's inability to accommodate the welfare of the individual in conflict with the greatest good for the greatest number. Existentialist themes abound in the literary works of French writer-philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus; the latter's *The Outsider*¹⁴ constitutes a classic literary articulation of the existential notion of absurdity and remains one of the most significant illustrations of amorality. Jane Austen's novels are evidently informed by philosophical questions of virtue and character.¹⁵ More recently, we find issues concerning moral duty represented in the actions and attitudes of characters in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains the Day*,¹⁶ in which Kantian notions of detachment and rationality are contrasted with sentimentality and passion.

What is unclear in the third proposition, however, is how strong the connection needs to be, and how confidently we can determine that the connection holds. While it may be reasonable to assume that the literary works of philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Iris Murdoch, insofar as they exemplify their authors' own philosophical views, are in some measure *fed* by such views, it is clearly not the case that only novels that have been written by *bona fide* moral philosophers merit serious moral attention. Nor does their status as *bona fide* moral philosophers alone confer moral authority on their novels. As Raphael himself suggests, 'the possession of moral insight is not a prerogative of moral philosophers and indeed is sadly lacking in some of them.'¹⁷ For authors in general, the relation 'to feed' is harder to construe. If a particular novel, say Dickens'

¹² *Hard Times*, (Oxford: 1989)

¹³ *Intruder in the Dust*, (New York: 1964)

¹⁴ *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo, (Harmondsworth: 1983)

¹⁵ Her *Emma* (Harmondsworth: 1996) is an excellent example.

¹⁶ *Remains the Day*, (New York: 1993)

¹⁷ Raphael, *op. cit.*, p. 2

Hard Times, shares its thematic preoccupations with a body of moral theory such as utilitarianism, or deontology, or contract ethics or virtue theory, how confidently can we infer that the doctrine *fed* the novel and that this shared interest (whether or not they draw the same conclusions) is not just a coincidence; or a reflection of the moral preoccupations of the day that have, in turn, informed philosophical *and* literary endeavours to understand lived experience in the society from which *both* have contemporaneously emerged?¹⁸

Uncritically accepting the third proposition risks reducing all literary works with moral *issues* as their subject matter to works with moral *philosophy* as their subject matter, and thus to mere articulations of philosophical perspectives that subordinate literature to philosophy. Thus we could blur the line that separates the two enterprises. For all its dependence on a distinction between the two enterprises (for the relation 'to feed' to hold there must be a feeder and a fed), proposition three risks collapsing into either proposition one or proposition two. This is clearly not Raphael's intention, despite his acknowledgement of the thinness of this proposition.¹⁹ The other danger is that, at its limit, the proposition that philosophy feeds literature implies that only literary works that are informed by prior formal philosophical reflection can be of genuine moral value, that such downstream 'feeding' is a necessary condition of moral seriousness. This, however, as will be shown in later chapters, is an unsound conclusion to draw from the outer reaches of one possible interpretation of this proposition.

None of this entails that philosophical doctrines cannot furnish excellent material for works of imaginative literature. On the contrary, distinctly philosophical reflections have, directly or indirectly, provided material for some very fine novels, including Dickens' *Hard Times*. The claim is not that moral philosophy cannot valuably feed literature, but that the upshot of the proposition that it does so depends on how the term

¹⁸ I examine these questions in chapter five.

¹⁹ 'Proposition three,' he writes, 'Is thinner than proposition four.' *op. cit.*, p. 1

'feed' can reasonably be construed. Moreover, the claim that the proposition is plainly true has implications that require deeper examination.²⁰

Investigation of the role that imaginative literature can play both alongside and within a distinctly philosophical mode of reflection, however, can usefully focus on Raphael's fourth proposition, that literature can feed moral philosophy. He offers two meanings for the term 'feed' in this context, each of which constitutes a subtly different account (both of which I deal with in this thesis). The first meaning generates what can be called the 'propositional' account of the relation between literature and ethical reflection: 'If someone says that literature feeds moral philosophy,' writes Raphael, 'he may mean that the characters or situations in a work of literature can be used as evidence for some issues in moral philosophy.'²¹ On this account, literature can reveal or elucidate facts concerning ethical life that have the potential for substantive impact on the truth value, plausibility or practicability of moral propositions. This account of the value of the connection between philosophy and literature is endorsed by R. W. Beardsmore. He argues that literary representations of moral problems, situations and possibilities can furnish examples and counter-examples to '*illustrate and test* our philosophical theories.'²² The value of literature here is largely cognitive. In the context of its relation to moral philosophy, literature's value is derived from its being a source of ethical understanding, and it is accorded significance by reference to what it can reveal about ethical issues and ethical theories. This notion resonates with the first of two claims that Martha Nussbaum makes for a moral agent's reading experience in her *Poetic Justice*.²³ She holds that novel in particular, and novel-reading, can provide '...insights that should play a role (though not as uncriticized foundations) in the construction of an adequate moral

²⁰ I examine more deeply these implications in chapter five.

²¹ Raphael, *op. cit.*, p. 1

²² R. W. Beardsmore, "Literary Examples and Philosophical Confusion" in *Philosophy and Literature*, (Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series: 16, Supplement to *Philosophy*, 1983), p. 60. The italics are mine. I will examine these functions of literature in the next chapter.

²³ Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995)

and political theory.’²⁴ For Nussbaum, like Beardsmore and Raphael, novels are a particularly important source of material that can be of real service in the specifically philosophical endeavour of providing defensible principles of morality. Indeed, Raphael claims that this proposition constitutes by far the ‘most obvious, the richest, and the most satisfying’ relation between moral philosophy and literature.²⁵

The second meaning considered by Raphael of the notion that literature can feed philosophy appears to entail that some effect is produced in the reader’s moral outlook: ‘But to say that literature feeds moral philosophy can also mean that literature may stimulate a philosophical perception which otherwise might have been missed.’²⁶ If by ‘philosophical perception’ Raphael means some ethical consideration that may have been overlooked in direct philosophising, and a literary work *reminded* us of or *alerted* us to its existence or bearing, then it is difficult to see how this second meaning can significantly differ from the propositional account. If, however, he means that there is a moral dimension that is inaccessible via traditional philosophical reflection yet accessible through literature, or through an amalgam of the two endeavours, and that this access adds something valuable to ethical reflection, then the distinction between the two accounts, as well as the importance of the second account, becomes apparent. Rather than merely being an adjunct to moral philosophy, as would be the case if literature’s only value to ethical reflection lay in its capacity to help philosophy to develop and access proposals about ethical issues, this ‘attitudinal’ account implies that something about literature enables it to contribute in its own right something that cannot be attained by moral philosophy alone. This construal accords with Nussbaum’s second claim for the contribution to morality that novel-reading can make: ‘it develops moral capacities,’ she argues, ‘without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 12

²⁵ Raphael, *op. cit.*

excellent.’²⁷ For Nussbaum, these ‘moral capacities’ are necessary for an agent’s successful grasp and application of moral rules, principles, ideals or arguments. This is important: for without genuine motivating force, ‘the power,’ as Anthony Cunningham says, ‘to move us,’²⁸ a moral theory consists in mere stipulation, and is thus inadequate. Novel-reading can cultivate internal states that facilitate the capacity to recognise ethical significance and act on, and thereby to make reality out of, relevant and worthwhile ethical prescriptions. Because it is a function of normative ethics to furnish injunctions that require being committed to or consistently acted on, this second claim implies that imaginative literature must be given an especially important place in ethical reflection. Thus, the distinction between the two accounts turns on the distinction between cognition and motivation: the first account points to a possibility of ethical seriousness or a proposition concerning an ethical perspective, the second furnishes reasons to act in relation to such a possibility or proposition.

A growing number of moral philosophers are convinced that both interpretations of the proposition that literature can feed moral philosophy offer something valuable, and that insights derived from literature can augment ethical arguments in meaningful and substantive ways. They argue that a marriage between imaginative literature and philosophical reflection can, as Cunningham puts it, ‘...open the door to a richer conception of moral philosophy that can speak to the heart of what matters in a human life and character.’²⁹

The Argument

In the rest of this chapter, I consider the character of moral philosophy, conceived as a normative enterprise, and examine in outline the major approaches to ethics. I also consider some systemic limitations of normative ethics, and examine the arguments of some prominent philosophers

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Nussbaum, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Anthony Cunningham, *The Heart of What Matters*, (Berkeley: 2001), p. 10

concerning literature's role in helping to identify and address these issues. In the following three chapters, I critically examine those features of literature that render it valuable as a supplement to philosophical reflection.

Chapter two, *The Form and Content Connection*, deals with the formal distinctions between literature and traditional moral philosophy, and investigates the role of such literary devices as point of view, language and plot. The arguments in this chapter provide the foundation for the proposition that the value of the connection between philosophy and literature depends crucially on the distinction between them.

Chapter three, *The Expansion of Methods*, deals with literature's ability to illustrate, challenge and test a moral perspective, and so help to reveal and illuminate features of the ethical life that cannot be apprehended via traditional philosophical reflection alone. To illustrate this expansion of the philosophical method, I consider aspects of Kantian ethics and utilitarianism in light of a select number of literary works. I also review the claim that, because of its emphasis on character, the incorporation of literature into ethical reflection is most congenial to virtue ethics. Moreover, as J. R. Lucas observes, 'We are able, on occasion, by the exercise of a certain sympathy...to penetrate behind observable behaviour and to put ourselves in another's shoes and to see, to feel, to understand, what we ourselves would do if situated in his circumstances.'³⁰ A 'certain sympathy' is thus crucial to the realisation of genuine ethical ends. The argument is that seeing the world through the eyes of others enables one not only to understand their motives and actions, and to consider one's own responses to similar circumstances, but that, in doing so, one can uncover the extent to which a moral stance comports with one's own ethical convictions, how

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3. I shall investigate the substance of these arguments in the following chapter.

³⁰ J. R. Lucas, 'The Soul,' in Basil Mitchell, ed., *Faith and Logic*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 142

that stance can accommodate these convictions, or how these convictions need modifying in light of that stance. But one must possess an extensive freedom to do this.

Chapter four, *The Scope of Fiction and the Ascendancy of the Novel*, advances the argument that, because fiction both exercises and confers a number of important freedoms, including those which flow from the provision of an indefinite number of new perspectives unavailable via other means, fictional literature is an ideal tool for the exploration of ethical concepts. Given these arguments, I then ask: is *all* fiction valuable? This chapter concludes with the argument that, because the novel can depict the complexities of moral life more effectively than other narrative forms, it is the apotheosis of literary supplements to ethical reflection. However, it has been argued that, if literature is such a valuable supplement to philosophical reflection, why can we not treat literature itself as a form of moral philosophy?

Chapter five, *Can Literature be Moral Philosophy?*, deals in greater detail with the four propositions that Raphael advances for the connection between the two enterprises and his argument that the implications of each confirm that that some literature can properly be regarded as moral philosophy in its own right. I argue that, while literature can make a genuinely valuable contribution to ethical reflection and the development of moral insight, it cannot be an effective substitute for systematic philosophical reflection and analysis. As an adjunct to philosophical reflection, however, literature can enhance our moral understanding in a manner that does justice to us as complex beings in complex conditions, and in a way that traditional philosophical reflection alone cannot. Literature has the power not only to move us, but to help us shape our lives

and make reality out of ethical reflections.³¹ It follows that, as literature's ability to make this contribution is a consequential feature of its own form, there is sufficient reason not to treat literature as moral philosophy, which requires its own very different approach. I conclude the chapter, and the thesis, by arguing that cooperation between literature and moral philosophy can enhance moral understanding to an extent unachievable via either form of discourse alone, and that this enhancement flows directly from the distinction between the two.

In the course of argument, normative conclusions are unavoidable about the role of narrative art in moral philosophy, the extent to which it can be effective there, and which forms of narrative are most valuable. Therefore, this project is itself to an extent normative. In identifying and clarifying those features of literature that render it valuable to ethics, implications follow for the value of the literature with these features. This is consistent with received notions of normative enquiry, even in the philosophy of art. As Gordon Graham writes:

Normative theory of art is not concerned with the essential nature of 'art' but with explaining the different ways in which it can be of value and the relative importance that we should attach to each.³²

This thesis, however, does not constitute a comprehensive philosophy of literature. Aesthetic considerations are limited to their contribution to the value of narrative art in the specific area of ethical reflection. My principal concern is moral philosophy, the extent to which it captures the things that matter in our lives, and how literature may be of value in realising its aims in this regard. To this end, my thesis aims at clarifying and evaluating the role that literature can play within that discipline, as well as the role it can play in our quotidian moral concerns. To be sure, there is more to say about

³¹ cf Colin Radford, 'How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 49 (1975); also Barrie Perkins, 'On Being Moved by Anna Karenina and Anna Karenina,' in *Philosophy* 52.

³² Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, (London: 1997), p. 127

literature beyond what I say about its service to normative ethics; just as there are other significant features of literature worth more attention than I give them. Moreover, there could be objections to my treatment of literature, and of my arguments for its role within moral philosophy; not the least of which could be the charge of philistinism occasioned by my implicitly cognitivist position on literary art and its instrumental value. However, my specific focus on literature and its role as a supplement to moral philosophy does not devalue the purely aesthetic aspects of literature. The focus is narrow, but I do not dismiss any other values that may attach to or derive from a work of art. The various ways in which literary art is valuable do not inhabit mutually exclusive spheres. Given that we can derive knowledge from a work of art, and given that this knowledge is valuable in another sphere, it does not follow that that work of art cannot also be valuable for the sheer pleasure that it brings, or for some other positive effect or feature.

Similarly, there is more to say about normative ethics, and morality as a whole, than will be said in this thesis. The concern here is with the intersection of the two enterprises and how this intersection can be valuable to ethical reflection. In investigating the mechanics of this relation, inevitably many aspects of philosophical analysis and literary criticism, while important in other contexts, fall outside this project's scope altogether.

The claim that literature – particularly in the form of the novel – can feed or otherwise supplement moral philosophy implies that literature can furnish something of significance that cannot be derived from philosophical reflection alone. With this in mind, we need to consider the fundamental aims and methods of moral philosophy.

The Moral Philosophy Enterprise

The ethical concerns of philosophers embrace two species of question, each of which characterises a distinct field of ethical enquiry.³³

In the enquiry known variously as *ethics* or *philosophical ethics*, or more generally as *moral philosophy*, philosophers discuss what have been referred to as 'first-order' questions about the ethical life. First-order questions are characterised by the action-guiding nature of the answers that they seek or the substantive evaluative judgements that they elicit. Questions that fall into this category include: What sort of life ought I to lead? What sorts of actions ought we to perform? Is truth telling always right? What sorts of actions ought we to refrain from performing? Is lying always wrong? What should I do in *this* situation? Why perform *this* action rather than another? Is it ever right to hurt another person? Is it right to treat others as mere means to further my own ends? What character traits or dispositions are virtues, and which count as vices?³⁴ First-order evaluative questions also include: Is pleasure good? Is friendship good? Is knowledge a moral good? Is hate always bad, or is it sometimes good? Is anger always bad? Is freedom good? Is slavery always bad? As Colin McGinn observes, insofar as these questions are concerned with, '... what it is right to do in specific concrete circumstances,'³⁵ first-order enquiries are intended to be of practical value when making ethical decisions and addressing real-life moral dilemmas, such as we find concerning censorship, euthanasia, the justifiability of war, abortion, animal rights, and so on.

Systematic philosophical attempts to answer first-order questions constitute *normative* or *prescriptive* ethics. These 'systems' are normative or prescriptive because they seek to construct moral theories that inform, and are intended to have sufficient motivational force to guide, the actions,

³³ For a detailed exposition of this distinction see Jonathan Harrison's *Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, (London: 1971) pp. 13-19. For an overview of contemporary positions regarding this distinction see Louis Pojman, *op. cit.*, especially parts I and VIII. For an excellent pictorial representation of the distinction, see Ted Honderich (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, (Oxford: 1995), pp. 940-941.

³⁴ Jonathan Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 13

attitudes, practices and judgements of moral agents and agencies. First-order moral enquiries of this type are considered specifically *philosophical* because, as Bernard Williams notes, they are characterised by a 'reflective generality and a style of argument that claims to be rationally persuasive.'³⁶ Which is to say that, first, they concern moral questions that are abstracted from the particular so as to apply to all persons in all situations and, hence, have universal or general applicability; and, second, they aim to furnish good reasons to act in one way rather than another, to live one form of life rather than another, or to cultivate certain character traits rather than others. It is the impartiality and the 'reasonableness' of these arguments that lend them rational persuasiveness and thus endow them with normative force. If we do not act in accordance with the prescriptions of a reasonable moral argument, then we are not doing what there are good reasons for doing, and hence, we are not doing what rationally we ought to do.³⁷

Philosophers engaged in the second field of enquiry, on the other hand, ask what are have been called 'second-order' questions about ethics and ethical concepts. Second-order questions are questions *about* first-order questions and the theoretical issues to which they give rise. Addressing these issues constitutes the philosophical activity generally referred to as *meta-ethics*. Meta-ethics deals with such issues as the meaning of ethical terms and the nature of the sentences in which they occur; with the logical relations between ethical terms and concepts; and particularly with the notions of *description*, *prescription* and *evaluation*. Meta-ethics also deals with the epistemology, ontology, logic and semantics of moral claims and terms, and includes such questions as whether moral judgements are subjective or objective, the reality of moral properties, the justification of normative claims, and so on.

³⁵ Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*, (Oxford: 1997), p.1

³⁶ Bernard Williams *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass: 1985), p. 2

³⁷ There are of course difficulties with this view of reason's power to move us, not the least of which is discussed by David Hume in books II and III of his *Treatise*, (*op. cit.*). I make mention of the 'rational' aspect of normative conclusions at this early stage merely to demonstrate the general character of first-order questions in philosophical ethics.

The distinction between first and second order questions is elucidated in Ross Harrison's entry on meta-ethics in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*: '...instead of being concerned with questions of what actually is right or wrong (or good and bad), it is concerned with the meaning or significance of calling something right or wrong.'³⁸ But this does not mean that first- and second-order questions always occupy mutually exclusive spheres of reflection, and several landmark philosophical works deal with both strands together. Kant's *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and his *Critique of Practical Reason* are, alongside John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*, classical examples of works that integrate treatments of first- and second-order ethical questions.

However, an overemphasis on second-order concerns can blinker moral philosophy to much that matters in a human life and character, and which is the proper and pressing subject of philosophical reflection.³⁹ As McGinn suggests, 'there is a range of ethical topics that is both philosophical and not comprehended by meta-ethics.'⁴⁰ Moreover, enquiries that confine their attention to the language and logic of morals are open to the charge of philosophical negligence. While, with Williams,⁴¹ it is difficult to deny that reflection on the nature of ethics, what we say about ethics, and how we say it, are proper concerns for moral philosophers, meta-ethics draws criticism concerning its apparent 'failure to engage with what is really morally interesting.'⁴² McGinn agrees and argues, 'there is more to moral life than what moral words mean.'⁴³ And while it must be acknowledged (as he does) that there is more to meta-ethics than formal reflection on the linguistic constitution of ethical words and judgements, a number of prominent moral philosophers reject the claim that our philosophical reflections ought to be confined to meta-ethical

³⁸ Ross Harrison, 'meta-ethics' in Honderich, *op. cit.*, p. 555.

³⁹ For a summary of these arguments, see Adamson, Freadman and Parker, *op. cit.*, especially Simon Haines "Deepening the Self," pp. 21-38

⁴⁰ Colin McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 2

⁴¹ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 127

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

questions of this nature.⁴⁴ The position that they reject is expressed by G. E. Moore who, in his rejection of the notion that moral philosophy can properly be concerned with the particular ethical judgements, makes the tendentious claim that '...it is not the business of the ethical philosopher to give personal advice or exhortation.'⁴⁵ As Simon Haines observes, however, moral philosophers who argue against Moore's injunction are frustrated at having been told 'for nearly a century' that:

...in ethics the important things are the ones we cannot speak about; or that to speak about them is simply to say 'boo' or 'hurrah' with rhetorical embellishments; or that the moral questions which really matter are not 'How should one live?' or even 'What should I do?', but 'What kind of thing is a moral judgement?', and 'What kind of concept is "good"?'⁴⁶

Haines argues that this way of doing moral philosophy misses a major point of philosophical ethics. And even if it has not entirely missed the point, in systematically neglecting first-order issues that embrace what McGinn regards as 'questions of greatest ethical importance,'⁴⁷ a moral philosophy that deals only with second-order questions fails to speak to the heart of what matters in a human life and character. However, to whatever extent meta-ethical concerns inform their projects, the philosophers whose works are considered in this thesis are primarily concerned with addressing first-order questions about the ethical life.

The Entry Point for Ethical Reflection

According to Anthony Cunningham, 'Good moral philosophy should be about life – life as we best know it and as we might know it at our best.'⁴⁸ For the moral philosopher in the western tradition, however, a mere articulation of opinion concerning the best form of life is not enough. Moral

⁴⁴ See Simon Haines, *op. cit.*, p. 22. In his article he constructs a list of 'only the most eminent' which includes Bernard Williams, Alisdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, Annette Baier, Martha Nussbaum, and Raimond Gaita. To his list I would add Gordon Graham, John Norris, Richard Kearney, Anthony Cunningham, Colin McGinn and others whose work I cite in this thesis.

⁴⁵ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, (Cambridge: 1903), p. 3

⁴⁶ Simon Haines, *op. cit.*, p. 22

⁴⁷ McGinn, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁸ Anthony Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 1

philosophers seek compelling *arguments* for the best ways to act, the best ways to live and the best forms of character 'for creatures like us.'⁴⁹ In so doing, they often employ a dialectical method to develop an adequate account of morality. This is a form of argument, according to Gordon Graham:

...that proceeds from claim to counterclaim, from thesis to counterthesis, testing every point critically as it goes. The test consists in drawing out the implications of each claim that is made and examining these implications for consistency with all the other elements in the argument.⁵⁰

The philosopher is not engaged merely in asserting and counter-asserting opinions, but in a process, as Graham points out, 'in which thought is clarified, made more precise, and given rational grounding.'⁵¹ Our feelings are important in questions of morality, but feelings are prone to conflict and, as James Rachels observes, these are often the products of 'prejudice, selfishness, or cultural conditioning.'⁵² He argues that:

If we want to discover the truth, we must try to let our feelings be guided as much as possible by the reasons, or arguments, that can be given for the opposing views. Morality is, first and foremost, a matter of consulting reason: the morally right thing to do, in any circumstance, is determined by what there are the best reasons for doing.⁵³

The normative aspect of philosophical reflection aims to furnish a conceptual framework in which good reasons for *everyone* to do or to believe certain things in the moral sphere are identified or prescribed – a framework of universally applicable tests for right and wrong. This requirement removes ethical judgements from the realm of the subjective particular, where they are prone to the influences of personal taste, prejudices, or other preconceptions. This is not to suggest that feelings and opinions play no role at all in philosophical reflection: 'Rather,' says

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 69

⁵⁰ Gordon Graham, *Living the Good Life: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, (St. Paul: 1990), p. xiv.

⁵¹ *ibid.* pp. xiii-xiv.

⁵² James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: 1995), p. 10

⁵³ James Rachels, *loc. cit.*

Graham, 'dialectical philosophy consists in putting our own opinions and those of others to the most critical test we can.'⁵⁴ And if, as Cunningham suggests, good moral philosophy is about life, then good moral philosophy must start from lived experience - the very source of our opinions and ideas concerning morality and what it calls for. It is from lived experience that questions emerge concerning the actions we ought to perform, the lives we ought to lead and the character traits we ought to cultivate. The tests that we apply to ethical arguments must reflect this basis. As John Kekes writes:

In civilized society, freedom, security, and wealth often coexist with deep and serious disquiet about good lives. People reflect on the conduct of their affairs, because they are naturally thoughtful, or because they face grief, injustice, disappointment, illness, or boredom, and whether they wonder about the point of it all, about how their lives could be improved, and about why and how they should face adversity. Moral philosophers ought to be able to give reasonable answers to these questions.⁵⁵

William Frankena observes, 'The ultimate concern of a normative theory of obligation is to guide us in the making of decisions and judgements about actions in particular situations.'⁵⁶ In order to have the power to move us, philosophical arguments, in addition to heeding the exigencies of reason, must be responsive to the first-order concerns identified by Kekes from which our strongly held moral opinions often derive. Moreover, if moral philosophy is properly construed as a 'systematic endeavour to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories',⁵⁷ and if it is true that for it to be *good*, moral philosophy should be about life, then its most basic aim must be to give a reasonable answer to the most basic ethical question, first framed by Socrates and regarded by many western moral philosophers as the proper entry point for ethical reflection: 'How ought we to live?'⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Gordon Graham, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁵ John Kekes, *The Examined Life*, (Lewisburg: 1988), p. 9

⁵⁶ William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliff: 1973), p. 12

⁵⁷ Louis Pojman, 'What is Ethics?' in Louis Pojman (Ed.), *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd edn., (Belmont:1995), p. 1

⁵⁸ Plato, *loc. cit.*

However, as Frankena contends, Socrates' question entails more than just a simple request for guidance in how best to live, what to do, or how to act in particular situations:

We also wish to make judgements about what others should do, especially if they ask us what we or they should have done, about whether what we or someone else did was right or wrong, and so on. We are not just agents in morality; we are also spectators, advisors, instructors, judges and critics.⁵⁹

A survey of the philosophical literature that deals with traditional western normative ethics reveals that, in seeking 'reasonable answers' to these questions and provide guidance that genuinely improves our lives, modern philosophers' arguments for general principles that ground particular ethical judgements belong to three major approaches to Socrates' question, each of which construes its requirements in a different sense. The first involves the interests and desires of the moral agent; the second involves his or her actions; and the third involves ways of life and forms of character.⁶⁰

In the first sense, Socrates' question prompts an enquiry into the most desirable life for agents as stake-holding individuals. The most prominent ethical paradigm taking this response is 'Ethical Egoism.' Each of us ought to act, says the ethical egoist, such that our actions best promote our own interests.⁶¹ This normative doctrine finds its earliest expression in Plato's *Gorgias*,⁶² in which the Sophist Callicles argues (against Socrates) that things are valuable by reference to our desiring them, and that the fulfilment of these desires is constitutive of the good life. The good life for the Calliclean egoist consists in getting what we want, with no regard for the interests of others except insofar as they further our own. An apparently more socially

⁵⁹ Frankena, *loc. cit.*

⁶⁰ Another view, ethical relativism, entails the response to Socrates' question such that we ought to act in accordance with the moral code imposed by the society in which we live (or the culture in which we participate).

⁶¹ Ethical egoism must be distinguished from *psychological egoism*, the essentially descriptive position according to which it is held that, as a result of our 'natural condition' we cannot help acting out of our own interests.

⁶² Plato, *The Gorgias*, Walter Hamilton, trans., (Harmondsworth: 1971), pp. 74ff

sensitive formulation of ethical egoism, advanced by modern philosophers sympathetic to the doctrine such as Robert Olsen,⁶³ holds that, in pursuing their own interests, individual agents contribute to the collective betterment of society. In one sense this is trivially true – if every individual in a society is happy, then the total sum of happiness in that society is greater than if this were not the case. The total happiness of a society must be proportionate to the sum of happiness enjoyed by individual members. But if the obligation to act in our own interests is ultimately grounded in an obligation to act for the betterment of society, then the doctrine ceases to be essentially *egoistic*, and our moral obligations will require an altogether different account from that found in egoism. If our obligations are grounded solely in self-interest, then it is difficult to imagine how social goods can genuinely be accounted for in those social dimensions that transcend practical necessity, private indulgence and private prudence. Indeed, there seems to be something counter-intuitive in the view that the content of morality is confined to self-interest. As Cunningham observes:

As daughters, sons, siblings, friends, lovers, spouses, parents, neighbors, colleagues, comrades, and fellow citizens, we share intrinsic interests in how others live their life and the shape of their character. So long as we care about others, we cannot be indifferent to how they answer these [moral] questions. When life is a shared voyage, as it is by design and aspiration for most of us, the life and character of our company is at the heart of what matters.⁶⁴

Taken to its limits, ethical egoism distorts or deforms many things that matter; not the least of which is the interest we have in, and share with, other people, and how to deal with situations in which one's own interests conflict with the interests of others. But the challenge of Ethical Egoism should be taken seriously: one question that it prompts is perhaps even more basic than Socrates' and asks: Why should I live one way rather than another? Why shouldn't I live strictly according to my own interests and

⁶³ In his *The Morality of Self Interest*, (New York: 1965).

⁶⁴ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 9

desires? These issues feature in the other senses in which Socrates' question can be interpreted.

In the second sense, the question asks how ought I to conduct myself as a rational moral agent among other rational moral agents such that my actions and attitudes give appropriate weight to the interests of all agents who stand to be affected by my actions, and reflect the notion of a shared voyage. Normative philosophical responses to this sense of the question typically take one of two forms: deontological, or law-based, ethics; and consequential, or outcome-based, ethics. The former generally holds that we ought to act in accordance with our duties to obey the moral law, whatever its provenance, while the latter grounds the moral value of actions in the states of affairs that they produce.

Deontological theories include the *divine-command* view, in which moral actions are right or wrong by reference to God's commands. They also include *intuitionism*, the theory that there is an autonomous realm of moral facts discoverable only by intuition. Knowledge of basic moral principles is derived from an agent's basic intuitions of the moral law, or of goodness as a moral property, and agents ought to act in accordance with obligations derived from such intuitions. Prichard and Ross (among others) differ on the source of intuitions and the normative strength of obligations so intuited, but all agree that intuition is the basis of substantive moral judgement.⁶⁵ Another species of deontological theory, *rationalism*, holds that reason can reveal our moral obligations. The rational approach to ethics includes the *contract theory*, in which right action is determined by reference to a set of rules or laws that rational agents agree (or, as found in hypothetical contract theory, *would rationally* agree) to establish for their mutual benefit. Classic articulations of the contractarian view are found in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau,⁶⁶

⁶⁵ For a useful discussion of these approaches to intuitionism see Philippa Foot, *Theories of Ethics*, (Oxford: 1967), pp. 2-3. See also Frankena, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-104.

⁶⁶ See Hobbes, *op. cit.*; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, reprinted in D. Wootton (Ed.), *The Political Writings of John Locke*, (Harmondsworth: 1993), and Rousseau, J., *The Social Contract*, reprinted in *Social Contract*, (Oxford:1960).

and contemporary exponents of this approach include John Rawls and David Gauthier.⁶⁷

However, by far the most influential view that reason can reveal the moral law is *Kantianism*. Kant argues that reason can reveal absolute moral rules and that moral obligation derives from universal duties to act in accordance with these rules. His guidance for what is morally right comes in the form of the 'categorical imperative' which he believes expresses the 'universal imperative of duty' from which all moral duties can be derived. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant formulates three versions of the categorical imperative, the first two of which are intended to offer clear guidance in deciding what is right. The first formulation stipulates that moral acts be performed in accordance with rules that reason dictates everybody ought to follow:

Act only in accordance to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law (AK 4: 421).⁶⁸

Kant's view of human dignity as an intrinsic and inalienable good is encompassed in the second formulation of the categorical imperative, which requires that our actions be consistent with a universal respect for the dignity shared by all persons:

So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means (AK 4: 429).

For Kant, however, moral value does not reside simply in the performance of duties consistent with the categorical imperative or in the practical fulfilment of obligations so derived. Because there are practical limitations on our capacity to perform moral actions which, in turn, limit our control over the consequences of our actions, and because, for Kant, we cannot be held morally responsible for those things over which we have no control, moral value cannot reside either in our actions themselves or their

⁶⁷ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Oxford: 1971); and David Gauthier's *Morals by Agreement*, (Oxford: 1986).

⁶⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785, trans. Mary Gregor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Consistent with the standard method for citing passages from Kant, all further in-text references are to the German Academy edition of Kant's works (1900-).

consequences. What we can control, however, are our *intentions* to act one way or another and, because of this, Kantian ethics locates moral value in our *will* that moral duties be performed. This idea is expressed in Kant's third formulation of the categorical imperative:

...the third practical principle of the will, as supreme condition of its harmony with the universal practical reason, the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law (AK 4: 431).

Other philosophers deny that there are such absolute moral rules as envisioned in Kant's categorical imperative, and reject the notion that the locus of moral value resides in solely our will, or that reason alone can reveal the moral law.

Rather than according ultimate moral value to the intentions to perform duty in accordance with universal moral rules, *teleological* views locate value in the projected or actual outcomes of our actions: the ends to which they are directed, or their consequences. *Perfectionism* holds that, in deciding how to conduct ourselves towards others, we ought to consider the extent to which our actions promote human excellence, however construed.⁶⁹ A teleological *theory of justice*, on the other hand, proposes that our moral obligations (as individual agents as well as agencies) are to obey or create rules that aim at producing the greatest balance of good over evil in a political community, while at the same time accommodating the interests of all members of that community.

The general teleological approach is specifically embodied in *utilitarianism*, the most singularly influential teleological theory which accords moral significance only to the *consequences* of actions, measured in terms of the amount of overall pleasure, happiness or utility that they produce, or in the overall number of desires or preferences that they satisfy. Utilitarianism has its modern origins in the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill,⁷⁰ the latter furnishing its paradigmatic formulation. As the categorical imperative defines the duties of moral agents in Kantian ethics,

⁶⁹ John Rawls discusses (and rejects) perfectionism in his *A Theory of Justice*.

so classical utilitarianism grounds right action in what Mill terms the *Greatest Happiness Principle*:

The creed which accepts as the foundations of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.⁷¹

We ought to live, according to the utilitarian, by reference to this principle, such that our actions produce the greatest amount of utility for the greatest possible number of sentient creatures who are affected by them. In utilitarianism, intentions to act in certain ways or to produce certain outcomes count for nothing in the final analysis, in which only consequences, measured in terms of utility, however construed, have value. Just what constitutes utility, however, and the extent to which it can legitimately direct our actions, remains the subject of serious debate among philosophers, as does the notion that the morality of actions is solely dependent on their consequences.⁷²

Those who embrace the third sense of Socrates' question regard the dichotomy of Kantian deontology and utilitarian consequentialism as fundamentally flawed. Instead of grounding morality in duties to obey rules or to apply formulae to calculate best consequences, they focus on how to cultivate forms of character and ways of life which embody a plurality of ethical considerations and values. Consequently, a third branch of normative ethics has begun to receive the attention of prominent moral philosophers who believe that, to quote Julia Annas:

...there is something deeply inadequate about the view that when we systematize theories about our ethical views we are faced with the traditional option, a simple choice between consequentialist and deontological ways of thinking.⁷³

Philosophers like Annas and Williams raise serious questions about the expectation that the subject matter of ethics, and of ethical theory, be

⁷⁰ Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (Oxford: 1876), and Mill, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ John Stuart Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 137

⁷² For an excellent debate concerning the relative merits and criticisms of utilitarianism see J.J.C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: 1973).

⁷³ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, (New York: 1993), p. 4

simple. Williams protests: ‘...why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many?’⁷⁴ On this view, there is something misguided in the endeavour to find a small number of principles and maxims to cover the vast and complex range of moral situations that confront complex individuals throughout their complex lives. A growing dissatisfaction with the traditional ethical views flows from their failure to capture something important about the ‘messy particularities of life, with all their uncertainties and complexities.’⁷⁵ This perceived failure leads some philosophers to take seriously the responses to first-order questions found in more general arguments for valuable ways of life and forms of character, including *existentialist* and *self-realisation* theories. These theories attempt to knit all pertinent aspects of a human life into an integrated, valuable and intelligible whole, such as cannot adequately be envisioned in Kantian or utilitarian ethics.

The predominant approach in this view, usually referred to as Virtue Ethics or Virtue Theory, originates in the writings of Plato and Aristotle and informs the ethical reflections of the Stoics, the Cyrenaics, the Epicureans, and the early Christians. Its current resurgence is generally held to have commenced in the middle of the twentieth century and it is generally acknowledged that this resurgence of philosophical interest in the virtues can be traced to G. E. M. Anscombe’s article ‘Modern Moral Philosophy.’⁷⁶ Rather than treating moral questions as consisting in What should I *do*? or How should I *act*? virtue ethics interprets Socrates’ question as asking What sort of *person* should I *be*? What kinds of traits and dispositions ought I to cultivate? A virtue-based approach to ethics is no less normative, however, for in its emphasis on an agent’s character it still seeks to answer Socrates’ question and shape the conduct of lives. But it also takes into consideration other features of the moral life, such as the

⁷⁴ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 17

⁷⁵ C. A. J. Coady, “Literature, power, and the recovery of philosophical ethics” in Adamson, et al, *op. cit.*, p. 213

⁷⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ in *Philosophy*, 33.124 (January 1958).

roles played by practical reasoning and the emotions, and the extent to which certain dispositions and forms of character inform our ethical choices and judgements.

In whatever ways these approaches differ, and whatever their relative strengths and weaknesses, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism and virtue ethics all share one thing in common: they attempt to offer an adequate account of morality; one which provides insights that can act as genuine forces in our lives and which furnishes prescriptive accounts of right action or good living that can consistently be acted on or committed to. However, moral theories must go beyond mere stipulation: they must provide good reasons to act while at the same time accounting for our deeply held moral convictions and their origins. Because of these dual exigencies, and consistent with the notion that good philosophy must start from life, Adam Morton argues that there are two different requirements for moral philosophy:

1. On the one hand a moral philosophy must be in accord with many, at least, of the moral opinions that we feel intensely. Ideally, it should connect them up together in a way that helps us see the deeper values that underlie the things we care about.
2. A moral philosophy must help us to find a way through the moral problems that really trouble us. It ought to help us to see more clearly what makes a problem difficult, and how we might find a solution to it.⁷⁷

However, notable philosophers argue that traditional philosophical reflection and discourse is insufficient to fully meet these requirements, despite how well its emphasis on 'rigour, consistency, completeness, perspicuity, and orderliness' suits the task of thinking about the kinds of ultimate concerns embodied in morality.⁷⁸ As Cunningham argues: 'Even if philosophical reflection has much to offer, such reflection alone cannot tell us everything we need to know about life.'⁷⁹ And even if no mode, or combination of modes, of reflection can tell us *everything* we need to know

⁷⁷ Adam Morton, *Philosophy in Practice* (Oxford: 1996), p. 120

⁷⁸ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 71

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

(such an expectation is inconsistent with reasonable beliefs concerning the limits of knowledge), a substantive moral response to the first-order issues enumerated by Kekes⁸⁰ seems to require more than traditional reflection alone, with its emphasis on generality, can offer. As John Norris argues:

Rules and principles of conduct are important, but they alone cannot decide for an agent in any given situation how they are to be applied nor adequately prescribe how to act. The sheer complexity of many situations could not be accounted for by any fixed set of rules.⁸¹

Norris does not suggest that traditional philosophical reflection, with its emphasis on generality and abstract rationality, is totally misguided. Rather, he argues that a mode of ethical reflection confined to the traditional method is inadequate to the complexity of particular situations and that this inadequacy impedes philosophy's endeavour to fully satisfy the requirements of moral philosophy identified by Morton. However, none of these philosophers claim that philosophical reflection and its traditional methods cannot make a substantive contribution to our understanding of morality and its demands; only that it needs augmenting in ways that ensure that these requirements are met and thus better help us to navigate through the complexities of moral life. Acknowledging that Socrates' question is the best place to start for moral philosophy, and how it may help to find a way through moral problems, Bernard Williams writes:

Philosophy starts from questions that, on any view of it, it can and should ask, about the chances we have of finding out how best to live; in the course of that, it comes to see how much of it itself may help, with discursive methods of analysis and argument, critical discontent, and an imaginative comparison of possibilities.⁸²

The questions that Williams suggests philosophy should ask of itself lead to the central problem of the limits to philosophy's ability to address the heart of what matters in a human life and character. If philosophy is to make a substantive contribution to morality by engaging ultimate concerns about

⁸⁰ See p. 28, above.

⁸¹ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 20

⁸² Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 4

what to do and how to live, and by giving good reasons to act or live in some ways rather than others, and if it cannot do this via its traditional discursive methods alone, yet wishes, for very good reasons, to retain the more valuable aspects of these methods, then how does it achieve this? This problem is crystallised in Williams' concern over the limitations of philosophy's traditional endeavours:

How does one combine argument (which is after all likely to constitute the philosopher's special claim on anyone's attention) with either the longer leaps or the more concrete detail which provide the more interesting stuff of moral thought?⁸³

Accepting the limitations of previous responses, a number of prominent philosophers look beyond the conventional boundaries of their discipline for resources that could lead them to reasonable and meaningful answers to Socrates' question. These philosophers have two important things in common: first, they all share the view that there is something deeply inadequate about the ethical theories that constitute the western normative tradition; and, second, they express a conviction that imaginative literature offers something of value to philosophical reflection that may help to overcome these inadequacies. In the chapters that follow I examine their arguments and attempt to give a critical account of how the incorporation of literature into philosophical reflection can enrich our exploration of morality.

⁸³ Williams, *Morality*, (Harmondsworth: 1972), p. 11

THE FORM AND CONTENT CONNECTION

My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything.

*Joseph Conrad*¹

Targeting the Issues

As noted previously, two meanings could attach to Raphael's proposition that literature can feed moral philosophy. The first meaning was termed the 'propositional' account of the relation between literature and ethical reflection. In this account, a work of literature can illustrate, reveal, elucidate or remind us of some ethical fact or possibility with the potential to contribute substantively to moral philosophy. Raphael suggests that literary characters and situations may furnish 'evidence for some issues in moral philosophy,' and that this constitutes by far 'the most obvious, the richest and the most satisfying' relation between moral philosophy and literature.² Here, insofar as its contribution is valuable for what it can reveal about ethics and ethical issues, literature's role is largely cognitive. But,

¹ Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

² Raphael, *op. cit.* p. 1

while certainly valuable in this regard, literature can contribute more to ethical reflection than the mere provision of creative illustrations of ethical concepts, hypothetical counter-examples and confirming instances of ethical arguments. In what was termed the 'attitudinal' account, it was argued that, in 'stimulating a philosophical perception which might have been missed,'³ literature can lead to a more acute awareness of possibilities of moral seriousness than can traditional philosophical reflection alone. Thus, the incorporation of literature in ethical reflection may help to develop certain moral capacities that allow us better to grasp, commit to or act on or, as Nussbaum has said, 'to make reality out of,' worthwhile ethical prescriptions. To a certain extent, these two meanings interpenetrate and overlap. However, as one's assessment of the truth value or plausibility of ethical propositions necessarily affects one's moral outlook and one's views on the validity and practicalities of ethical theories, the bulk of this thesis deals with the first of these meanings, the propositional account. Where they overlap, however, some explanation of the value of their connection will be offered.

In examining Raphael's claim that it entails the most obvious, richest and satisfying relation between the two enterprises, my aim is to develop and evaluate arguments for the value of literature in illustrating, testing, reminding us of and exemplifying ethical issues. The following two chapters are thus devoted to revealing the supplemental contribution that literature offers philosophical ethics. To this end, two ethical theories, Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, are discussed in light of a select number of literary works. While it must be acknowledged that there exist many ethical theories with which to explore the relation between ethics and literature, and many works which themselves constitute examples of how this relation may be exploited, the two 'classical' theories were chosen because each provides the fundamental principles that underpin their more nuanced and sophisticated derivatives, and both continue to hold currency

³ *ibid.*

in ethical discourse while informing public as well as academic ethical debate. However, it is perhaps important to note here that Kant and Mill have *not* been chosen as the *only* representatives of traditional moral philosophy, nor as the only representatives of prevailing ethical discourse. Rather, in referring principally to their theories, the intention is to respond to the contrast between Kant's and Mill's approaches to ethics as *representative of* (and fundamental to) two *general* approaches to ethics that derive from their positions and have undeniably dominated post-enlightenment ethical discourse.

Moreover, while it must also be acknowledged that a vast body of contemporary literature is concerned with ethical perspectives not directly related to those derived from Kant or Mill, to argue against the currency of the general ethical positions for which they are progenitors is to ignore the status and influence of a number of contemporary works of moral philosophy. Insofar as it argues against the utilitarian hegemony, for instance, the clearly (and self-consciously) Kantian position developed in John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* is responsive to this dichotomy; as is the thematic preoccupation of Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*, which explicitly seeks to establish as the default position a more discursive ethical mode, thus displacing the utilitarianism that she sees dominating contemporary debates in western economic and justice policy.

The fact that there have been, and continue to be, other distinctive approaches to ethics is neither rejected nor diminished by an acknowledgement of the stranglehold that the Kantian/Utilitarian dichotomy has had on contemporary western moral thought. Moreover, given that this thesis explicitly focuses on how literature may be harnessed to help philosophical ethics transcend the limits entailed in this dichotomy, and on how ethical reflection *in general* may benefit from the contemplation of literary depictions of ethical seriousness, it seems reasonable to focus on the most general positions that clearly represent the dominant views. And these are still undeniably informed (either explicitly or in spirit) by the arguments advanced by Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill.

Granted, to this approach it might be asked: 'What price is then left on the exclusive disjunction of deontology and consequentialism?' To this question it may be flatly answered: 'No price.' Indeed, this thesis rejects the exclusivity of the disjunction and, as the discussion of thick ethical concepts conceived by Williams and Cunningham (as well as the brief discussion of virtue ethics) reveals in Chapter Three, the disjunction itself is fallacious. Just as there is more to ethical reflection than the meanings of moral terms, there is more to ethical choice than that which is offered in the disjunction between rules and formulae. But arguing that the disjunction is fallacious is not the same thing as arguing that the perceived dichotomy that informs it, however falsely, is not dominant, influential or extensive. Moreover, the suggestion that the deontological/consequentialist disjunction has *not* dominated modern ethical discourse ignores the very real fact that so much philosophical ethics in recent years (starting with, but not limited to, Anscombe's aforementioned 1958 landmark paper) has been *explicitly responsive* to the disjunction. Indeed, to argue that the views represented in generally Kantian or generally utilitarian ethics are out-dated is to ignore a great deal of contemporary debate and there exists an extremely vast body of contemporary literature devoted to the analysis, support or rejection of Kantian and utilitarian ethics, all of which serves, at least perceptually, to give the disjunction ontological validity.

But, as already noted, this is not to suggest that modern ethical theories that are unrelated to the Kant/Mill divide lack validity. Quite the contrary is true. Indeed, while much of their early work is clearly responsive to the divide, the recent writings of philosophers such as Bernard Williams, Alisdair MacIntyre, Sabina Lovibond, John McDowell, John Kekes and Julia Annas embody approaches to ethics that are quite unrelated to those taken by the deontologists and utilitarians. However, it is not the aim of this thesis to construct or evaluate an independent ethical theory, but to explore the question concerning how literature may be harnessed to assist in the construction and evaluation of such an approach. To this end, these works are not examined in this thesis and the question of

precisely what an appropriate outcome would consist of has been left open. Rather, it is suggested only that it might profitably resemble the approach to ethics generally comprehended under the genus of more holistic inquiry that focuses on ways of life and forms of character, and which accommodates an appreciation of the diversity of humanness such as may fruitfully be apprehended in the detailed, extended, connected presentations of character typically found in serious (but not necessarily closely realistic) novels. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Four, literature's ability to furnish content to ostensive definitions of moral concepts makes it an ideal supplement for ethical theories, such as virtue ethics, that endeavour to propound certain traits or dispositions as ethically desirable.

In its most fundamental construal, the claim that literature can feed or valuably supplement philosophical reflection implies that literature can furnish something that cannot be derived from traditional philosophical reflection alone. This in turn implies that there is a distinction between philosophy and literature, and that the value of the relation between the two is embedded in this distinction. I begin this chapter by considering the unity of form and content to draw a formal distinction between philosophical writing and imaginative literature. I then examine how this distinction contributes to the value of the connection between the two enterprises.

Philosophical and Literary Discourse

A criticism of philosophical discourse is that its formal features, its language and its expository structure, render it unable adequately to reflect all that is important ethically to human life and character. It was shown earlier that, in addressing first order questions about the moral life, at least one aim of philosophical ethics is to provide guidance to the moral agent in the form of a universal test for right or wrong applicable to all persons in all situations. However, the argument in question here is that the propositions of philosophical discourse cannot convey or embody the

particular, individualised concerns which inform concrete moral situations and which, at least indirectly, underpin moral philosophy's endeavour to achieve a systematic understanding of the ethical life. Whether specific ethical theories fail to achieve this goal, or whether the objective itself is misguided or unattainable by conventional argument, proponents of this criticism hold that philosophy, in its quest for valid and universal moral principles, tends to ignore the full complexities of 'real-life' situations faced by moral agents. That is, in specifying the logical conditions for an objective moral judgement, philosophical discourse tends to simplify the complex reality confronted by a moral agent acting on such a judgement.

Nussbaum argues that this limitation is at least in part a consequence of the formal and stylistic features of traditional philosophical discourse. She claims that it could be remedied by philosophers attending to imaginative, literary depictions of the ethically significant life. She argues that form and style are essential to the meaning of imaginative writing and, as such, are indivisible from its content. According to Nussbaum, 'there is, with respect to any text carefully written and fully imagined, an organic connection between its form and its content.'⁴ In *Love's Knowledge*, she claims:

Certain thoughts and ideas, a certain sense of life, reach toward expression in writing that has a certain shape and form, that uses certain structures, certain terms.⁵

She argues that works of imaginative writing, particularly the novel, derive their form from their authors' conceptions and express 'his or her sense of what matters.'⁶ She further claims that 'certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist'⁷ and that this allows narrative art to capture important aspects of life to which 'the blunt terms of ordinary

⁴ Nussbaum 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 4

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 5

⁷ *ibid.*

speech, or of theoretical discourse, are blind.’⁸ She holds that the world’s complexity, mysteriousness and ‘flawed and imperfect beauty’⁹ cannot be stated in the prosaic language and expository style of what she terms ‘conventional’ philosophical prose; a style, she states, which is ‘remarkably flat and lacking in wonder.’¹⁰ Thus, according to Nussbaum, literature’s value to ethical reflection flows from the ability of its language to alert the reader to the nuances and subtleties of what really matters more effectively than can the language of traditional philosophy. For her, our task as moral agents, ‘is to live as good characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing.’¹¹ And this is how, in her view, imaginative literature can augment traditional philosophical attempts to understand complex moral phenomena.

However, the ‘organic’ relation between form and content is not limited to works of imaginative literature. While philosophers like Nussbaum regard the philosophical ‘style’ inattentive to the complexity of real life moral issues, attention to the relation between form and content in philosophical prose can yield useful insights concerning its limitations and the role for imaginative literature in helping to overcome these. It can also help to identify the aims of conventional ethics and to assess whether, and the extent to which, criticisms such as Nussbaum’s are well-founded.

To highlight the distinction between philosophy and literature, and to illustrate the role that literature can play in ethical reflection and the value of this distinction, consider the following passages from Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* as a paradigm of traditional philosophical style:

Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead he must in all his actions, whether directed to himself or also to other rational beings, always be regarded *at the same time as an end* (AK 4: 428).

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 3-4

Kant reasons that from this position there follows an objective moral principle which, in serving as a universalisable practical law, must be applied by all moral agents in all their dealings with all rational beings, including themselves. He grounds this principle in the notion that '*rational nature exists as an end in itself*' (AK4: 429). Consistent with his conception of a supreme moral principle, Kant articulates a rule for the treatment of rational beings as the second formulation of his Categorical Imperative:

The practical imperative will therefore be the following: *So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means* (AK 4: 429).

Kant's prose fulfils the role that is traditionally assigned to moral philosophy. Free of hyperbole, symbolism and complex imagery, these passages clearly state the principle that Kant embraces. Methodologically, Williams would agree that its reflective generality and a style of argument that claims to be rationally persuasive qualifies Kant's discourse as typically and distinctly philosophical.¹² Moreover, the propositional structure of Kant's argument places it in the wider context of rational inquiry and evokes in the reader a similarly rational response, inviting a dispassionate evaluation of the principle's objective validity. As McGinn argues, 'Moral discourse has been construed as essentially a list of moral directives or affirmations, and the only question is the proper analysis of these directives or affirmations.'¹³ Such an analysis typically involves three critical questions: First, does the passage or concept hold together under scrutiny - that is, does it contain any internal inconsistencies or contradictions? Second, how consistent is it with the remainder of the philosopher's views in the context of the wider theory in which it is located? Third, does it conflict with independently established facts or moral intuitions? The outcome of such analysis is critical to the validity of the principle under question. But to objectively evaluate validity, the reader must maintain a degree of intellectual and emotional distance from what is

¹² Bernard Williams (1985), *op. cit.*, p. 2

being analysed. Thus both the theory under scrutiny and the subsequent analysis remain in the sphere of abstract thought and reveal few of the complexities involved in applying the principle to real-life situations. Therefore, while Kant's '... emphasis on rigor, consistency, completeness, perspicuity, and orderliness'¹⁴ suits his prose to the task of clearly prescribing the logical conditions for moral judgement, Nussbaum's claim is that what it fails to address, and what an abstract objective analysis fails to reveal, is the complexity of *acting* according to such conditions and the practical and psychological implications that might flow from such actions.¹⁵

However, the criticisms embodied in Nussbaum's concerns would be misplaced if directed to the formal features of Kant's argument as they relate to his *meta*-ethical objective to determine the precise locus of moral value. This is an important point, and one which Nussbaum's emphasis on the stylistic features of philosophical prose might easily miss if she were to regard as flawed *all* moral philosophy which fails to attend to the particular concerns of concrete agents. To do this would ignore valuable aspects of critical inquiry in which abstraction is not a failing but a necessity and which, consequently, shapes the methodology of rational inquiry. It would also ignore the other mode of ethical discourse distinguished in the previous chapter. If a central function of meta-ethical inquiry is to investigate and construct a critical account of the *universal* nature of moral judgement, and if this constitutes a legitimate feature of the landscape of philosophical ethics alongside its prescriptive counterpart, then Nussbaum's argument that traditional philosophical discourse fails to account for the nuanced complexity of concrete moral life could constitute the mistake of evaluating one form of inquiry in terms of the aims of another form of discourse, however the two may be related. Kant's project is a case in point, and he encapsulates its aim in the following question:

¹³ Colin McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 172

¹⁴ Anthony Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 71

¹⁵ This argument is explored in some detail John Norris, 'Philosophy and Literature' in *Cogito*, Vol. 11, No. 1, April 1997, p. 18ff. I examine this issue further below.

...is it not thought to be of the utmost necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology? (AK 4: 389)

Kant later distinguishes between a 'pure philosophy of morals' in which moral principles are 'fixed *a priori* by themselves' and a philosophy of 'applied' morals which is based on what is peculiar to human nature and which is of mainly 'anthropological' interest (AK 4: 410n).

Moreover, in the context of Nussbaum's view of the unity of form and content, in which 'finding and shaping the words is a matter of finding the appropriate ... fit between conception and expression,'¹⁶ Kant's careful choice of words and the structure of his text are clearly appropriate to his aims, and constitute an effective expression of his sense of what matters in philosophical ethics, certainly in terms of his stated meta-ethical objective of constructing a pure moral philosophy in which the precise and locus of ethical value is identified, whether or not other more recent moral philosophers subscribe to this aim. The prosaic, dispassionate language employed to convey his view is not accidental to his argument's content, but essential to its meaning. As S. Körner observes of Kant's choice of terminology: '...by using technical terms he does draw attention to important aspects of a subject which the language of polite conversation and *belles lettres* would probably merely adorn but not illuminate.'¹⁷ Kant himself defends his choice of language when, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he writes:

If readers ... know of more popular expressions that are still just as suitable to the thought as the ones I use seem to be to me, or if they think they can show the nullity of these thoughts themselves and so too of the expressions signifying them, they would by the first very much oblige me, for I only desire to be understood; but with respect to the second, they would deserve well of philosophy (AK 5: 11).¹⁸

¹⁶ Nussbaum, *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ S. Körner, *Kant*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 62

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, (1788, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 9

Kant concludes that 'as long as these thoughts stand, I very much doubt that expression suitable for them and yet more common can be found' (AK 5: 11).

Moreover, if there are general ethical duties (or even generally desirable ways of life or forms of character), and if these are accessible through reason or other means, then they must be cognisable by all rational beings, irrespective of their particular circumstances. Nussbaum's argument that we ought to 'live as good characters in a good story do' expresses a normative component that must be justified in terms of the ethical value of those characters' lives and actions. Consistency requires that what is good for such fictional characters must also be good for all who are enjoined to live like them. As moral examples, therefore, at least two questions need to be addressed to Nussbaum's directive: precisely what is good about these characters' lives? How are the principles which ground this assessment to be justified? As Kant argues:

... every example of [morality] represented to me must first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model; it can by no means authoritatively provide the concept of morality (AK 4: 408).

It is necessary to justify the principles that underlie a moral concept to avoid the circularity that characterises the form of ethical argument in which a moral agent is enjoined to do as good characters do because they do good things and it is good to do good things. Insofar as it offers a form of guidance that moral agents find accessible and engaging, Nussbaum's claim that we ought to live as 'good characters in a good story do' possesses clear practical merit.¹⁹ However, completeness requires that such prescriptions be grounded in a critical account of what constitutes goodness in ethical terms, and from which we can infer what makes the good characters good, and which, according to Kant, constitutes 'a desideratum of utmost importance to the actual fulfilment of [its] precepts'

¹⁹ Although it still remains to give an account of what constitutes a 'good story' in this context. I examine this question later.

(AK 4: 410). To this end, Nussbaum must explain how literary accounts of 'good' characters are compelling, rather than just appealing or admirable: *why* ought we to live as good characters in a good story do? By reference to precisely *what* is a good character good? What is it about a character's actions or attitudes that render them worthy of approbation, worthy of imitation, worthy of standing as ethical for our own actions and attitudes? How widely applicable are the criteria against which we evaluate their actions and attitudes as morally significant? That is, do they apply to all persons in all situations? Or are they authoritative only in situations analogous to those represented in the literature in which the characters appear? Constructing such an account requires the philosopher to go outside the story and adopt a critical perspective on its characters and their actions and attitudes. For this account to have normative force, it must also develop a more basic aspect, namely, the ethical principles on which such judgements derive. As considered in the previous chapter, this activity constitutes the critical endeavour of traditional moral philosophy, for which its emphasis on rigor, consistency, completeness, perspicuity, and orderliness makes it ideally suited.

However, while a comprehensive ethical theory must embody a defensible account of the good to ground its precepts and from which to establish authoritative criteria for right action and good character, once grounded the normative function of moral philosophy is to furnish imperatives that guide agents in choosing how best to act, which forms of character to cultivate, or which ways of life are ethically most worth living. As Annas argues, as the implied recipients of the philosopher's wisdom, moral agents find it natural to make a number of practical demands on an ethical theory. In particular, she says, we assume 'that a moral theory should help us to decide what is right for us to do, and in particular, that it should help us to resolve moral dilemmas and difficult moral cases.'²⁰ In this respect, Nussbaum's criticism concerning the remarkable flatness and lack of wonderment expressed in the language of traditional moral

philosophy is better founded. If philosophical ethics is to be of true practical value and, as such, offer a compelling account of how we ought to live, then it must be attentive not just to the nuances and complexities of the ethical life. It must also attend to the formal features that accommodate these subtleties, as well as the stylistic aspects of discourse in which the prescriptions of normative ethics are communicated.

Moreover, if it is true that the prescriptions of traditional philosophical ethics fail adequately to accommodate the complexities of immersed, concrete judgements, then it follows that traditional, objective analyses of such theories as Kant's fail to address crucial components of the agent's own moral understanding. In addressing the question 'How does this apply to all rational beings?' reflecting on the universal force of an ethical perspective may ignore certain questions fundamental to an agent's practical application of the principle. While it may be true that questions such as 'What does the principle mean to *me*?' 'To what degree is it concordant with my own moral views and presuppositions?' 'How do I recognise when such a principle ought to apply?' 'How do I put it into practice?' fall outside the scope of general objective analysis, they are all important to the practical aim of normative ethics which requires first-order inquiries to provide practical guidance and accommodate the genuine motivating force of ethical judgements. For example, suppose someone threatens your life in such a way that unless you either kill or seriously disable that person you yourself will be either killed or seriously disabled. What is it to treat the other person as an *end* here? If you kill the person, are you using the person as a *means* to your own survival? Or, if you kill or seriously disable the person, are you treating the person as an end, a fully rational and responsible moral agent who deserves to be forcefully prevented from harming you? How is the personal cost of such action accommodated in the ethical judgement? What role in the decision does your history play, your deep-seated attitudes concerning violence? What of the relationship between you and the aggressor? What effect does

²⁰ Annas, *op. cit.* p. 6

the question of desert have on the evaluation?²¹ Such examples show that the discourse of traditional philosophical analysis and the general principles it engenders often ignore the particulars of moral judgements, and that this is an important concern if an ethical theory is to carry genuine normative force.

However, the criticism that the language and conceptual simplicities of abstract moral philosophy cannot sufficiently accommodate the complexities of immersed moral judgements is not limited to Kantian ethics. As noted previously, it applies to any ethical system that posits universal rules or prescriptions that inevitably fail to capture something important about the complex moral situations that confront concrete individuals throughout their lives. As McGinn argues, a meaningful response to questions the above example elicits falls outside the scope of traditional philosophical analysis and requires us to 'draw upon an enormous background of tacit knowledge about human life, not clearly codifiable into ethical principles.'²² Iris Murdoch maintains that while our decisions to act in particular ways or live particular kinds of lives may be partially guided by the logical analysis of moral concepts, they need to be informed by more than just logic: 'We would like to know what, as moral agents, we have got to do because of logic, what we have got to do because of human nature, and what we can choose to do.'²³ She argues that addressing these questions should form part of philosophical reflection's task, but that it may be 'impossible to carry out' by the traditionally analytic and neutral philosophical methods. But, she writes:

even to discover what, under these headings, we *can* achieve certainly demands a much more complex and subtle conceptual system than any which we can find readily available.²⁴

Nussbaum's position on the function of moral philosophy dovetails with that expressed by Murdoch. In this respect, she shifts her attention from

²¹ I acknowledge the contribution of Dr Edgar Sleinis in articulating this example.

²² McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 174

²³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London: RKP, 1970), p. 2

²⁴ *ibid.* pp. 2-3

stylistic concerns to the normative substance of moral philosophy when she argues:

...general and universal formulations may be inadequate to the complexity of particular situations; that immersed particular judgements may have a moral value that reflective and general judgements cannot capture.²⁵

Coady concurs with Nussbaum and claims, 'moral thought and imagination need to be rooted in an attentive perception of the messy particularities of life, with all their uncertainties and complexities in full view.'²⁶ In discussing possibilities for the recovery of philosophical ethics, he accepts the importance of reflective and general judgements; but he argues that, since 'the moral life is part of the practical life and so has essential reference to action, challenge and problem solving,'²⁷ ethical prescriptions must accommodate the imagination and resourcefulness of moral agents:

Moral thinking can, and must, strive for objectivity, but this does not entail a mindless and insensitive application of a grid of rules and formulae to whatever situation arises.²⁸

According to Cunningham, moral thinking requires an approach to ethics which '...opens the door to a richer conception of moral philosophy that can speak to the heart of what matters in a human life and character.'²⁹ McGinn, too, is dubious of the more narrowly conceived methodologies of moral philosophy and argues that moral philosophers must aim 'to do justice to the varieties of moral experience, to the entire range of ethical life, and this ... requires us to go beyond the usual assumptions and methods.'³⁰

A Vital Role for Literature

But if this richer conception of moral philosophy which does justice to the entire range of ethical life cannot be achieved via traditional philosophical

²⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, (Oxford: OUP, 1989), p. 182

²⁶ C. A. J. Coady, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 220

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 213

²⁹ Anthony Cunningham, *op. cit.* p. 5

reflection alone, either in terms of its ability to communicate its precepts or something more conceptually significant, then what means are available to the moral philosopher for accommodating the full complexity of moral judgements? As Williams asks:

Can the reality of complex moral situations be represented by means other than those of imaginative literature? If not, can more schematic approaches represent enough of the reality? How much of what genuinely worries anyone is responsive to general theory?³¹

It is here that literature can make its most valuable contribution. Writers of imaginative literature are not bound by the same constraints that confine philosophical discourse. As a result of this freedom, the author of creative fiction is able to furnish us with a wider range of problems, situations and possibilities with which to illustrate and test our theories than those portrayed in traditional philosophical argument.³² Moreover, in the absence of direct experience from which to evaluate our own subjective responses to moral situations and hence contribute to our self-understanding, literature can provide a range of experiential possibilities that are not available in the realm of abstract reasoning. As Ducasse notes, 'In a good work of fiction the reader enters imaginatively into actions and experiences for many of which no opportunities occur in real life and which he could not actually perform.'³³

However, not all philosophers agree with this account of the value of literature to ethical reflection. R. M. Hare, while arguing that 'sympathetic imagination plays an important part in moral thought,'³⁴ questions the value of literature in investigating the factual grounds of moral thought. According to Hare:

For story-books, though they help to stimulate our imaginations, do not by themselves help us, very much, to

³⁰ McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 2

³¹ Williams (1972), *op. cit.*, p. 11

³² Beardsmore, *op. cit.*, p. 62

³³ Ducasse, S., 'Taste, Meaning and Reality in Art' in S. Hook (ed.), *Art and Philosophy*, (New York: University Press), p. 190. Cited in Beardsmore, *op. cit.* pp. 62, 63

³⁴ R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, (Oxford: OUP, 1963), pp. 182-3

separate what is really likely to happen from what is not, nor to assess the probable frequency of its occurrence.³⁵

He argues that the use of literature in philosophical discourse obscures the real issues with which philosophy is properly concerned, and presents an impediment to clarity of thought.³⁶ John Locke was a particularly trenchant critic of the use of narrative devices common to imaginative literature to embellish prose intended to 'inform or instruct' its readers:

... in discourses where we seek rather Pleasure and Delight, than Information and Improvement, such Ornaments ... can scarce pass for Faults. But yet, if we would speak of Things as they are, we must allow that all the Art of Rhetoric, besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgement; and so indeed are perfect cheat; and therefore however laudable or allowable Oratory may render them in Harangues and popular Addresses, they are certainly, in all Discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided.³⁷

For Locke, the use of metaphor to signify ideas is 'plain cheat and abuse,' and wilfully using words that stand 'sometime for one thing, and some times for another,' constitutes 'great Folly or greater dishonesty.'³⁸ Locke firmly believes that morality is capable of demonstration and that 'the precise real essence of the things moral words stand for may be perfectly known.'³⁹ However, for Locke a barrier to this perfect moral knowledge derivable from the meanings of words arises from the use of words that have uncertain and dubious meanings; this, in turn, renders 'discourse about moral things' uncertain and obscure.⁴⁰ Indeed, he suggests that, if stripped of obscurity and ambiguity, the meaning and significance of many

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 183

³⁶ R. M. Hare, 'Universalisability' in *The Monist*, 49, pp. 199-200. Also see my reference to Hare in this context in chapter one of this thesis, n. 5.

³⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Niddich, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), III.X.34, p. 508.

³⁸ *ibid.*, III.X.5, pp. 402-403

³⁹ *ibid.*, III.XI.16, p. 516

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

works of philosophy and imaginative literature could be '...contained in a nutshell.'⁴¹

However, while in its quest for conceptual clarity, philosophy has a central role to play in our understanding of moral phenomena, as Phillips argues, 'attempts at philosophical analysis can go either way: they can obscure as well as clarify.'⁴² He claims that in its quest for a clear, universal and general account of morality, philosophy often treats as inimical to its aims the forms of 'complexity and particularity of character and situation explored in literature.'⁴³ But in ignoring the complexity and particularity of moral judgements, philosophical reflection can obscure the ways that a moral perspective '...may change, be eroded, be found wanting, or become impossible for people.'⁴⁴ To say that a moral perspective may be found wanting or impossible for people is to suggest that its prescriptions cannot be committed to or consistently enacted by the moral agent. Therefore, while the quest for clarity is a good start, as H. H. Price said, 'it is not enough.'⁴⁵ As McGinn observes of the traditionally conceived 'aridity' of moral philosophy: 'The danger in philosophical ethics is that what we gain in philosophical precision we lose in intrinsic interest, and conversely.'⁴⁶ He goes on to argue:

The task is to develop a moral philosophy that is both philosophically substantial and which also engages our ethical concerns.⁴⁷

This is not to suggest that moral philosophy ought totally to reject its traditional methods in favour of a whole new approach. In acknowledging the shortcomings of traditional normative ethics, and in prescribing a literary supplement to overcome them, it would be counterproductive to sacrifice the qualities of rigour, consistency, completeness, perspicuity, and

⁴¹ *ibid.*, III.XI.26 p. 523

⁴² Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 1

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ H. H. Price 'Clarity is Not Enough' in *Clarity is Not Enough*, H. D. Lewis (Ed.), (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), pp. 15-16

⁴⁶ McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 6

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

orderliness which can endow philosophical reflection with the power to illuminate moral concepts and propose worthwhile ethical prescriptions. Indeed, the detailed analysis of moral concepts is essential to its task. John Norris emphasises this point in his encapsulation of the propositional account:

The importance of literature ... lies not in its presenting an alternative view to philosophical ethics but in its ability to supplement any such study by drawing our attention to other important features, such as the significance of aspects that are particular to any situation.⁴⁸

Norris claims that these important features are often overlooked in traditional philosophical discourse, with its emphasis on the development of universal ethical principles. He endorses Nussbaum's position when he argues, 'we should be alert to the way in which various texts may engage different aspects of the personality, and that moral insight may be presented in a number of different forms.'⁴⁹ However, Norris' argument implies that if one form of discourse through which moral insight is presented is to be of supplemental value to another form, then there must be a distinction between the two forms and that the value of the relation between them somehow depends on this distinction.

Language and Perspective in Philosophy and Literature

To illustrate the formal distinctions between moral philosophy and imaginative literature, and to show how literature can supplement an account like Kant's distinctively philosophical presentation of a moral perspective by drawing attention to the ethical significance of aspects particular to the situations it depicts, consider the following extract from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the scene presented, the main character Marlow describes his first encounter with the indigenous workers retained under the authority of the king of Belgium to mine and to harvest ivory in the Congo:

⁴⁸ John Norris, *op. cit.* p. 17

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were as free as air – and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the shrunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which dies out slowly. The man seemed young – almost a boy – but you know with them it's hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held – there was no other movement and no other glance.⁵⁰

While not directly autobiographical, this novel is informed by Conrad's own experiences in the Congo during the late nineteenth century. In writing *Heart of Darkness*, his stated intention was to alert an ambivalent European public to the injustices of imperialism in western Africa; and to expose the often brutal, selfish and exploitative means by which ivory and other riches were collected and sent to satisfy demand on the 'home front.' As Conrad himself wrote in a letter to his publisher, he wanted to expose the political ineptitude and moral bankruptcy of those responsible for 'opening up' the African continent: 'The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa seems like a justifiable idea.'⁵¹ However, this moral theme only becomes apparent on

⁵⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1995), pp. 34-35

⁵¹ Conrad to Blackwood, cited in John Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 85

reflection and analysis. No explicit moral judgement is passed in the text. Instead, the moral significance is subtly embedded in the language employed to describe the scene.

The most apparent formal difference between Kant's principle and Conrad's scene appears in the contrast between the perspectives of each account. Kant's constitutes what Norris calls an 'outsider's perspective,' by which he means that Kant is 'stipulating the objective conditions which must apply for an act to have moral worth.'⁵² Thus, while Kant stipulates the conditions under which a particular kind of moral judgement concerning the treatment of humanity *must* be made, and implies a spectator's stance, the passage from *Heart of Darkness* represents the kind of *situation* about which such a judgement might be made (but not the judgement itself). So depicted, the narration in *Heart of Darkness* constitutes very much an insider's perspective on the scene: the reader apprehends the moral significance of the scene not as an impartial observer, an outsider, but from the perspective of a character immersed in his own deliberative field. The insider's perspective is a valuable device through which to analyse a character's moral decisions and, in presenting a situation's moral aspects from the character's point of view, it helps the reader to penetrate behind observable behaviour and see the world through the character's eyes, thus revealing the complexity of particular moral judgement.

For example, in his discussion of the connection between religion and ethics, Stewart Sutherland draws on the distinction between inside and outside perspectives in his employment of a literary text to exemplify and help analyse a particular philosophical issue, the conflict between religious conviction and moral intuition.⁵³ Sutherland uses Ibsen's *Brand* to amplify the implications of Søren Kierkegaard's treatment of the moral theme contained in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, in which God

⁵² Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 18

⁵³ Stewart Sutherland, "Religion and Ethics - 1" in Martin Warner, ed., *Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 123-134

commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Such an exemplification also helps to draw out the connection between the biblical story, the relation between religious faith and ethics, and the central question in Plato's *Euthyphro*, concerning how to define piety, holiness or goodness: is something good because God wills or approves of it, or does God will or approve of it because it is good? If one takes a particular religious stance and answers that the former is the correct account of goodness, and one accepts that one must always act in accordance with God's will, then ethical priority will be assigned to his will, no matter how arbitrary it may seem. This arbitrariness is exemplified in the monstrous act he requires of Abraham, ostensibly for no reason other than to test Abraham's faith. In such a situation, Kierkegaard argues that ethical duty may sometimes interfere with religious duty. He suggests that where it conflicts with ethical priorities, the fulfilment of divine duty requires what he terms a 'teleological suspension of the ethical,' in which normal ethical judgement is suspended as one is bound to the realisation of God's ends, however incomprehensible. In *Fear and Trembling*, he writes:

In Abraham's life there is no higher expression for the ethical than this, that the father shall love his son. Of the ethical in the sense of morality [however] there can be no question of this instance. ... What ordinarily tempts a man is that which would keep one from doing his duty, but in this case the temptation is itself the ethical...which would keep him from doing God's will. But what then is duty? Duty is precisely the expression of God's will.⁵⁴

Kierkegaard describes the teleological suspension of the ethical as a resolution of the paradox in one's relation between the universal (ethics) and the particular (God, the eternal).

But the sparseness of the biblical story does little to reveal the emotional complexities involved in such a paradox. The reader is afforded a spectator's point of view from which to glean the facts of the matter and determine simply whether or not Abraham acts according to God's will,

⁵⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowry, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 70

and whether this act constitutes a teleological suspension of the ethical. Sutherland argues that, in considering Kierkegaard's treatment of the link between religious belief and ethics in *Fear and Trembling*, reflection on Ibsen's *Brand* helps to vivify the paradox inherent in an otherwise diabolical act's transformation into a holy one simply because it pleases God. *Brand* is valuable, he suggests, not just because it embodies an appropriate theme and parallels the biblical story, but because, unlike the story of Abraham and Isaac, which he calls 'a story of externals,' Ibsen's drama furnishes an insider's perspective on the issue and so exemplifies more of the complex reality of ethical choice:

Ibsen does open the window into Brand's deliberations. In Abraham we simply see the deed done, the farewell to Sarah, the journey, the preparation of the altar. We know nothing of what goes on within. The story is a story of externals. Brand, however, occasionally bares his soul: he defends his actions, he worries over the lack of reconciliation with his mother, he briefly considers moving for the sake of the child's [his son] health. Indeed in the third act we move with Brand to what he might call the final resolve of faith, to what others might regard as the final seduction by illness.⁵⁵

Act III of *Brand* contains a depiction of Brand's bewilderment as he wrestles with his decision whether to leave the parish and so save his son from mortal illness, or to remain, as he believes is God's command, and thus condemn his child to certain death. Whereas we see Abraham acting almost as an automaton, performing without obvious feeling the motions of sacrifice, in *Brand* we see the consciousness behind the externals and can make no corresponding evaluation of Brand's approach to his perceived duty, irrespective of how we evaluate his resolution to act. But this is not to say that Abraham does not experience a similar level of emotional turmoil, only that his story's reader does not learn of it and, hence, cannot know whether or not he experiences the kind of pain reasonably associated with such a choice. From the data in the story, how can one *know* that Abraham is not an automaton? How can one make intelligible such a monstrous

⁵⁵ Sutherland, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-126

profession of faith? How can one pity him? This last question resonates with Wittgenstein's questions concerning how one can know of another's pain. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he asks:

How am I filled with pity *for this man*? How does it come out what the object of my pity is? (Pity, one might say, is a form of conviction that someone is in pain).⁵⁶

From the text, we can form no such conviction that Abraham is in pain; indeed, he seems fully resigned to God's will. In Brand's case, on the other hand, the reader is left in no doubt that he experiences genuine turmoil in deciding where his ultimate duty lies. And while one may not precisely identify with his situation or condone his indecision (given the ethical priority entailed in parental love, for most, such a command would require no decision at all), one can at least *comprehend* it in terms of Kierkegaard's construal of the teleological suspension of the ethical. That is to say: based on a certain conception of God, one that is at least partly constituted in the definition, 'He whose will we are duty bound to obey,' one can accept that those who hold this conception of God feel must a strong compulsion to do as he commands. But, Abraham's apparent resignation aside, nothing in this definition alone requires that the fulfilment of duty be painless.

Brand's pain is evident near the end of Act III, in which he ponders the family doctor's injunction that the right thing is to renounce his religious conviction and leave, and hence save his son from certain death. Brand's turmoil is apparent in his pained exclamation:

As I am now ... as I was then ...
Where does truth end, error begin ...?
blind man or seer, which man am I?⁵⁷

Whether or not one agrees with his conclusion, and whatever one's evaluation of his mental state, there is cause to pity Brand, and his turmoil constitutes sufficient evidence to preclude consideration of him as a mere automaton.

⁵⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), §287, p. 83

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 127

Sutherland argues that reflection on such examples advance moral discussion in terms of 'how, if at all, moral beliefs and sensitivities may modify a conviction based upon religious belief to act in ways contrary to moral intuition.'⁵⁸ He claims that the psychological complexities and implications of such clashes can be drawn out more effectively by examining the situation from the agent's point of view than simply by analysing disembodied facts in terms of general theory: 'The initial point...is that the conflict is within the individual, quite as much as between individuals.'⁵⁹ In presenting the raw data for ethical judgement from an individual's point of view rather than the mere spectator's, literature is a particularly valuable source of material for such reflection.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator's point of view creates the effect of experiential immediacy, furnishing the reader with an enhanced apprehension of Marlow's experience through which to grasp its ethical significance. Moreover, the scene unfolds to the reader in the way that it could have unfolded to the narrator in the living moment. The scene's description begins with Marlow's first impressions - the black shapes in their attitudes of 'pain, abandonment and despair.' His attention is drawn away from the workers momentarily by a detonation blast at the nearby mine; he registers the 'slight shudder of soil under my feet.' This reminds him of the circumstances which led to the predicament of the moribund workers - 'The work!' - and directs his attention back to their situation and his contemplation of their plight. This mode of describing events as they unfold to a character is typical of the narrative technique known as 'stream of consciousness,' a term coined by William James to denote the 'flow of inner experiences.'⁶⁰ A further example from *Heart of Darkness* illustrates the stream of consciousness approach and its ability to furnish a sense of immediacy:

I was looking down at the sounding-pole, and feeling much annoyed to see at each try a little more of it stick out of that

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 128

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Cuddon, *op. cit.*, p. 919

river, when I saw my poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head. I was amazed. Then I had to look at the river mighty quick, because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about - thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet - perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove!⁶¹

In this very visual passage the reader is not told of things in the order in which they happened, but 'sees' them in the order in which they were apprehended by the narrator. There is a lag between sight and understanding: Marlow sees 'little sticks' first, and realises that they are arrows only slightly afterwards, all against a background registration of the river environment's silence. Stream of consciousness is a dramatic realisation of the insider's perspective; it allows the reader to enter imaginatively into the actions and experiences of a literary character and 'see' things as they do. In this respect, first person narratives in particular confer a sense of intimacy and immediacy on the reader's own experience. As will be argued later, the ability to view the world through the windows of perspective furnished by literature can play an important role in the development of our capacity not only to apprehend and understand situations of moral seriousness, but also to make reality out of worthwhile ethical prescriptions.

Value also attaches to other narrative viewpoints, and the insider's perspective is not limited to narratives presented in the first person. Third person narratives are often given from the point of view of one or more characters and allow the reader to 'see' the world through their eyes. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*⁶² is written in the third person and yet is as intimate as though it were in the first

⁶¹ Conrad, *op. cit.*, p. 75

person. Buchi Emcheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*⁶³ is a third person, strikingly intimate character portrait of a woman's struggle to make sense of cultural clashes in Nigeria in the 1940s. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*⁶⁴ combines to great effect the third person perspective with a stream of consciousness approach that allows the reader to share the maturing Stephen Dedalus' often tortured perceptions as he confronts the psychological complexity of moral choice. Consider the following passage in which Dedalus roams the darker streets of Dublin, a world away from the cloistered confines of his college:

He had wandered into a maze of narrow and dirty streets. From the foul laneways he heard bursts of wrangling and the drawling of drunken singers. He walked onward, undismayed, wondering whether he had strayed into the quarter of the jews. Women and girls dressed in long vivid gowns traversed the street from house to house. They were leisurely and perfumed. A trembling seized him and his eyes grew dim. The yellow gasflames arose before his troubled vision against the vapoury sky, burning as if before an altar. Before the doors and in the lighted halls groups were gathered arrayed as for some rite. He was in another world: he had awakened from a slumber of centuries.

She stood in the middle of the roadway, his heart pounding against his bosom in a tumult. A young woman dressed in a long pink gown laid her hand on his arm to detain him and gazed into his face.⁶⁵

Stephen's vision is troubled, his heart beats in a tumult, at least partially because he is experiencing moral anguish. On the cusp of adulthood, on the verge of waking from the slumber of doctrinal oppression, he must choose between fidelity to the abstract principles and specific rules of his faith, and willingly succumbing to the primordial urges of his senses - virtue or pre-marital sex? He chooses the latter, and for a time becomes a frequenter of Dublin's brothels, transforming his one 'sinful' act into a practice. Later, after a lengthy sermon on the subject of sin by the college chaplain which precipitates the climax of Dedalus' anguish over his dilemma, he is forced

⁶² (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)

⁶³ (Oxford: Heinemann, 1979)

⁶⁴ James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)

to consider yet another moral choice: does he confess his sinful practice and gain redemption at the cost of achieving a freedom of the senses? For to do so would deny him a degree of emotional and physical maturity not available within the confines of conservative Catholicism:

No escape. He had to confess, to speak out in words what he had done and thought, sin after sin. How? How?

-Father, I...

The thought slid like a cold shining rapier into his tender flesh. But not there in the chapel of the college. He would confess all, every sin of deed and thought, sincerely: but not there among his school companions. Far away from there in some dark place he would murmur out his own shame: and he besought God humbly not to be offended with him if he did not dare to confess in the college chapel: and in utter abjection of spirit he craved forgiveness mutely of the boyish hearts about him.⁶⁶

Stories can also be told from multiple perspectives. Joyce's *Ulysses*⁶⁷ is an amalgam of a number of perspectives, viewpoints and narrative devices, including musings by the older Stephen Dedalus, many instances of Leopold Bloom's streams of consciousness, and a lengthy interior monologue delivered by Molly Bloom, in which the reader acquires a detailed account of her thoughts and feelings. Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*,⁶⁸ a classic example of this mode of narration, consists of four novels, each of which is a story about the same events, but told from the viewpoint of a different character. Similarly, Anton Bock's novel *The Ash Garden*⁶⁹ contains three intertwined stories, each told from the standpoint of different characters whose lives have been affected by a single event, the bombing of Hiroshima: Anton Böll, senior scientist on the Manhattan Project who in the early parts of the narrative remains convinced of the necessity of bombing Nagasaki and Hiroshima near the end of World War Two; Emiko Amai, victim of the atom bomb blast at Hiroshima that Böll's research facilitated; and Sophie Böll, Anton's wife who cannot see the

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 107

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 136

⁶⁷ (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)

⁶⁸ (London: Faber & Faber, 1962)

world from her husband's perspective and has little understanding for the value he attaches to his role in creating the atom bomb.

The value of the insider's perspective is not limited to the novel. In drama we find the dramatic counterpart to the interior monologue in soliloquy. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* are classic examples of plays that make extensive use of soliloquy to convey a character's '...state of mind and heart, his most intimate thoughts and feelings, his motives and intentions.'⁷⁰ In poetry, we find the insider's perspective in poems written from first, second and third person viewpoints. William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*⁷¹ is a richly detailed poetic account of one person's perspective on the world. Other narratives, such as Solzhenitsyn's *For the Good of the Cause*,⁷² written from a more 'reporterly' third person viewpoint, employ a less overtly insider's perspective to tell their story; but they nevertheless manage to convey the complexity of ethical choices and how the implications of those choices impinge on the lives of their characters.

The argument here is that the individual viewpoints from which a narrative may be presented make a crucial contribution to literature's value to ethical reflection. Sleinis expresses this point when he writes:

... the display of individual points of view is characteristic of literature and grounds its capacity to engage our interest because we all possess an individual point of view. Seeing things from new points of view that we could not invent ourselves enlarges the ways we conceive of things, frees us from our routine modes of interpretation and enriches our inner life.⁷³

This also brings out a key difference between literature and ethics. The function of ethics is to construct a normative theory that includes a concept of 'goodness' that grounds the principles of action that govern the conduct of moral agents. However, as Sleinis argues, 'It is not the function of morality to create new objects for conscious awareness with power to

⁶⁹ (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001)

⁷⁰ Cuddon, *op. cit.*, p. 889

⁷¹ (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995)

⁷² (London: Sphere, 1971)

⁷³ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 51

command, sustain, and reward contemplation.’⁷⁴ This is the function of literature; and to regard moral philosophy as such, and to evaluate it in terms of its ability to fulfil these functions, would constitute a serious category error. But these functions can be harnessed to support the philosophical enterprise: seeing the world from Marlow’s perspective in *Heart of Darkness* helps us to contextualise the principle in Kant’s argument and enlarges the way we conceive its moral significance; seeing the world through Brand’s eyes allows us to consider aspects of the relation between religion and ethics that may be overlooked or receive too little attention in philosophical argument; and seeing the world through Stephen Dedalus’ eyes allows us to better understand the internal conflict between faith, duty and certain natural drives. Literature may not offer definitive solutions to the real life equivalents of these moral issues but, as Seamus Heaney writes, ‘if our given experience is a labyrinth, its impassibility can still be countered by the poet’s imagining some equivalent of the labyrinth and presenting himself and us with a vivid experience of it.’⁷⁵ While Heaney’s argument concerns poetry in particular, it applies with equal effectiveness to all forms of literature which engage the imaginative faculty. The argument here is that the furnishing of unique perspectives unavailable via traditional philosophical discourse allows readers to see, to feel and to understand what they would do in the kinds of ethical situations depicted in literature and thus better understand the labyrinthine character of moral judgement, and to see how the real concerns of concrete individuals may be accommodated in the theoretical stances of moral philosophy. But perspective is not the only device that adds value to literature as an adjunct to moral reflection; language, too, has a key role to play.

In *Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren argue, ‘Language is quite literally the material of the literary artist.’⁷⁶ In the passages from *Heart of Darkness*,

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 3-4

⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 2

⁷⁶ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd Edn., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963),

language is employed not only to create a scene, but also to emphasise the dehumanising effect of exploitation. It reduces the status of the indigenous workers encountered by Marlow to that of mere objects. They are not described in terms normally associated with persons, but in metaphors that draw attention to the bodily effects of their working conditions: 'black shapes,' 'moribund shapes,' 'nothing earthly,' 'black shadows of disease and starvation,' 'black bones.' In a further emphasis on objectification, the impersonal articles 'the' and 'a' are employed, rather than the personal and possessive pronouns 'their' or 'his,' the use of which implies personhood. Human status, signified by 'The man,' is not conferred until Marlow makes eye contact with one of the workers; and it is significant that the first time the personal pronoun is used, signifying personhood, is when Marlow interacts with him by giving him a biscuit. The images portrayed by this language create a representation of what exploitation has reduced these workers to, at least in the eyes of the exploiters: inefficient objects. The language used to describe the scene emphasises its pathos, evoking feelings of pity or even sorrow over the workers' plights. This scene from *Heart of Darkness* illustrates Norris' point that the writer of imaginative literature '...is able to draw attention to aspects that easily become lost in philosophical prose or which receive too little emphasis.'⁷⁷ Rather than obscuring the ethical issues in this scene, the language focuses the reader's attention on the workers' physical and mental suffering, thus emphasising the effects of their exploitation.

The language's ironic tone also conveys ethical significance. In one line we find a subversion of the moral authority of the legal system that validated the workers' engagement and their subsequent redundancy. As H. L. A. Hart writes: 'Few perhaps ... would find any contradiction in the assertion that a rule of law was valid and yet conflicted with some binding moral principle.'⁷⁸ The ironic reference to 'all the legality of time contracts,'

p. 174

⁷⁷ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 19

⁷⁸ H. L. A. Hart, *Law, Liberty, and Morality*, (London; OUP, 1963), p. 3

is a vivid reminder that there is often such conflict between ethics and the law. While the legality of the situation could perhaps be demonstrated, few would agree that the workers were immersed in a morally acceptable situation. Another ironic allusion, this one to the racism that characterised much of Conrad's contemporary audience, is apparent in the reference to the indeterminate age of the man with whom Marlow interacts, and turns the racial stereotype ironically against its users: '...but you know with them it's hard to tell.'⁷⁹

Stylistic devices and imaginative language are predominant features of the extract from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. When read in the context of the entire novel, the passage quoted can be seen to represent a turning point in the young man's life: the bifurcation between boyhood and manhood. Its language captures with compelling simplicity the atmosphere of the clash between Stephen's world of ardent religiosity enforced by his Jesuit teachers and the temporal pleasures of the secular world, with which he is, until now, almost completely unfamiliar. In so doing, the author ingeniously brings to the fore the hitherto mostly subtextual tension between these two worlds – the religious and the secular – that exists within Dedalus. It is a powerful illustration of the Kierkegaardian concept of choice: Dedalus confronts the clash between his religious world of righteousness and Christian ethics and the secular world of sinful temptation and he must choose to make a choice between the two.⁸⁰ The tone of the passage clearly reflects Dedalus' naïveté and indecision: can he choose to live in either world, leaving behind the other, or can he embrace both, and deal with the mental and ethical compromises incumbent in such a life? It is perhaps no accident that this scene takes

⁷⁹ There is a vast body of critical literature on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. My intention here is not to offer a criticism of the novel, but to elucidate how a certain reading can illustrate a moral issue. For a critical account of racist allusions and other themes in the novel, see Anthony Fothergill, *Heart of Darkness*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989). See also Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in *The Massachusetts Review*, 18.4 (winter 1975). For a critical anthology dealing with the novel, see Kimbrough, R. (ed.), *Heart of Darkness*, (Norton Edition, 1988).

place in Dublin's Jewish quarter, a 'neutral' territory outside the milieu of religiosity and nationalism in which Dedalus is immersed and from which he wishes to escape.

The extent of Dedalus' dilemma is invoked by language which describes the physical effects of the turmoil he is experiencing: 'A trembling seized him and his eyes grew dim;' he suffers from '...troubled vision;' and finds '...his heart clamouring against his bosom in a tumult.' It is noteworthy that 'trembling' and 'dim vision' are motifs that recur throughout the narrative to convey a sense of Dedalus' enduring turmoil. Moreover, the passage does not so much describe a chronologically ordered chain of events in a realistically drawn setting, but rather takes the reader to the scene confronting the character; and it does so by using rich mental imagery that does not directly tell us what Stephen sees, but invites us to share how he sees it. It is a journey into the mind of the character and we experience the scene as Dedalus himself perceives it. Indeed, the characters' sensations, feelings, impressions and thoughts are offered via so subjective a perspective as to give the impression that Dedalus is referring to himself in the third person.

One of the first stylistic observations the reader makes concerns the technique Joyce employs to punctuate and attribute dialogue. Rather than placing dialogue in inverted commas, Joyce indicates speech by placing a hyphen before utterances. This has the effect of producing dialogue that appears more immediate. The language, too, although rich with imagery and symbolism, is basically in 'everyday' form. Syntax is no more complicated or formal than in everyday speech. By Joyce's control of the written artform, images are achieved with remarkable economy. In describing the setting, 'foul laneways' seems to convey more about the environment than a more detailed, referential description might achieve. Indeed, referential description is all but absent from the passage, and the

⁸⁰ Kierkegaard's concept of choosing to choose is given its clearest expression in his *Either/Or*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, Robert Bretall, ed., (New Jersey, Princeton University Press), pp. 19-107.

reader must infer such details as time, setting and social context via the powerful yet economic imagery. That it is night, or at least evening, is indicated by the women's dress ('...long, vivid gowns'), the 'lighted halls,' and the 'yellow gasflames' burning against the 'vapoury sky.' The dress and manner of the girls and women that Stephen observes imply a particular social context and sharpen the image of a divided world. Compare the image of 'leisurely and perfumed' women in vivid attire with the archetypal women with whom he would normally come into contact – the hard working, pragmatic Irish Catholic mother of many or the idealised images of the Virgin Mary to whom Stephen would regularly pray. Moreover, would one expect 'bursts of hoarse riot and wrangling and the drawling of drunken singers' in the respectable and hallowed grounds of Stephen's Clongowes School?

At sixteen, Stephen is on the verge of surrendering his virginity. In this passage, it is as though, in so doing, he is sacrificing his Catholic purity in order to perform some rite of passage. This religious motif is evidenced in 'The yellow gas flames...burning as if before an altar.' Is this a sacrificial altar at which 'groups were gathered as if for some rite'? Could the '...young woman dressed in a long pink gown' who lays 'her hand on his arm to detain him' be his escort to the sacrificial altar? Or could she be the executor of his passage? As it turns out, she is both. In the passage which follows, she leads him to her room and Stephen gains his first sexual experience. This decision to go with her heralds Dedalus' symbolic entrance to the other world and his journey towards maturity. Of particular note is the line: '...he had awakened from the slumber of centuries.' He has reached a turning point in his life; he had inherited from his Irish forebears a willing submission to rule by both the English and the Roman Catholic Church that has dominated Irish culture for centuries and which he will soon choose to reject. He is on the verge of breaking free, of waking from the slumber of centuries and eventually freeing himself of the moral shackles that he feels have so constrained his artistic expression.

Narrative devices such as metaphor and irony, and qualities such as pathos, are not used in these and other literary texts as mere embellishments to their content. Rather, as Sleinis maintains in *Art and Freedom*, they are 'integral to literature's substantive content.'⁸¹ He argues that metaphor and other literary devices such as 'irony, satire, hyperbole, synecchdote, and even allegory ... are principally devices to induce us to look at things in new ways.'⁸² If language is quite literally the material of the literary artist, then metaphor in particular has an essential function in literature.

Norris argues, *pace* Locke, that the language of imaginative literature expresses a content that could not 'equally well find expression in some other words.'⁸³ Stripped of metaphor and other literary devices, the passages from *Heart of Darkness* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* would not speak as clearly to what matters in a human life and character. Indeed, to paraphrase the moral significance of the scenes from these novels in referential, non-metaphorical language - that is, to contain it in the nutshell about which Locke speaks - would be to reduce its description to bald propositional form: 'These workers are suffering;' 'This suffering is the result of some practice;' 'This practice is the kind of use of persons as mere means to an end against which Kant rails;' 'The choice between sensual experience and religious or national obedience can cause moral anguish.' While it may not be the case that all scenes such as those from *Heart of Darkness* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* cannot effectively be paraphrased while retaining their substantive content, the argument here is that such passages express a content the richness and complexity of which cannot *equally well* find expression in other words and definitely cannot be reduced to the abstract propositional form of traditional philosophical discourse.

⁸¹ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 50

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 51

⁸³ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 17. cf Cleanth Brookes who, in *The Well Wrought Urn*, (London: Methuen, 1971), argues that a poem's precise meaning is inseparable from its form. See

The significance of language and literary devices to a work's substantive content is particularly evident in poetry and, as Graham argues, 'There are many poems in which the interconnectedness of image and utterance is so marked that it is difficult to differentiate the two.'⁸⁴ To illustrate this argument for the unity of form and content, consider Chinua Achebe's poem *Refugee Mother and Child*, conceived by the poet as a representation of the human suffering that resulted from the Biafran War in Nigeria in the nineteen-sixties:

No Madonna and child could touch
that picture of a mother's tenderness
for a son she would soon have to forget.

The air was heavy with odours
of diarrhoea of unwashed children
with washed-out ribs and died-up
bottoms struggling in laboured
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most
mothers there had long ceased
to care but not this one; she held
a ghost smile between her teeth
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's
pride as she combed the rust-coloured
hair left on the skull and then –
singing in her eyes – began carefully
to part it ... in another life this
would have been a little daily
act of no consequence before his
breakfast and school; now she
did it like putting flowers
on a tiny grave.⁸⁵

The reader's apprehension of the ethical significance of Achebe's poem turns on pathos. The poem's imagery is vivid: the picture of starving, unwashed children struggling to move through air heavy with the odour of illness is an arresting presentation of great degradation. The description of the child as a 'son she would soon have to forget' invokes a sense of pathetic inevitability to his plight and the emotional burden of his mother.

also A. C. Bradley's essay 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake' in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, (London: Macmillan, 1909).

⁸⁴ Graham 1997, p. 113

coming to terms with her grief. The death motif prevails throughout the poem: she holds a 'ghost smile' and the 'ghost of a mother's pride;' 'the skull,' instead of 'his head' and the simile 'like putting flowers on a tiny grave' all invoke a sense of impending mortality. The simple and, in another context, inconsequential ritual of a mother combing her dying child's hair is given tragic dignity as a representation of the deprivation caused by war. The ironic juxtaposition of the first stanza's meaning relative to the poem's larger stanza is a striking yet subtle use of irony: the Christian imagery of the Madonna and child and the purity it symbolises, followed by a representation of deep maternal love in a scene of utter degradation subverts the stereotypical view that the African mother may love, or grieve over, her child less than her European counterpart. The poem does not treat the mother and her child merely as victims of war, it reveals them as persons. Just as the workers in *Heart of Darkness* remain persons despite the effects of their exploitation, the effects of war have not turned the mother and child into mere things. In attending to her dying child the mother is shown, in the words of Simone Weil, as 'fully another perspective on the world.'⁸⁶ As Raimond Gaita comments on Weil's point, this does not mean that she is 'merely a centre of consciousness,'⁸⁷ but an *individual* perspective whose grief resists the statistical representation of its owner either as a victim of war or as a mere unit in the abstract reasoning of those who would justify such a war on statistical grounds. Acknowledging that victims of war are also persons – unique perspectives on the world – is the first step to seeing the world through the eyes of others, and endows us with the power, as King Lear put it, to 'feel what wretches feel.'⁸⁸ Thus Achebe's poem furnishes the reader with an intimate impression of the human cost of war that no impartial record or statistical representation could ever achieve.

⁸⁵ From Achebe, *Beware Soul Brother*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1971), p.12

⁸⁶ Weil, cited in Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), p. 281.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

Moreover, the poem resists reduction to bare abstract propositional form because, while each of the propositions it embodies (such as 'War can cause the innocent to suffer' and 'African mothers love their children or grieve over their loss as much as European mothers do') may well be contained in a Lockean nutshell, their meaning and significance is, as Norris explains, 'dependent upon just these words being used, and is not reducible to some other form of words.'⁸⁹ This is what Graham means when he writes that, like the passages cited from Conrad's and Joyce's novels, the lines of a poem 'do not merely record a scene or episode; they get us to apprehend it in a certain way.'⁹⁰ He goes on to argue:

It may be incorrect to say that the same idea cannot be conveyed in any other way, but it is clear that paraphrase would require extended explanation and equally clear that this process of spelling everything out would destroy the inner complexity of the lines which makes the poetic expression arresting.⁹¹

It is through its range of forms and narrative devices that literature can illuminate and thus direct attention to important aspects of the moral life that may be ignored or distorted in traditional ethical discourse. As he writes:

... in great imaginative literature, the devices of poetry, story and drama can be harnessed, not just to please and entertain, but to create images through which the reader is given an enhanced apprehension of human experience.⁹²

Raphael agrees, and in his response to Cora Diamond's criticism that his account of the value of literature to ethics reflects a merely descriptive view of its role,⁹³ he argues that a literary work's form distinguishes it from the bald discourse of moral philosophy and adds value and significance to the role for literature in developing moral understanding. He asks of Diamond:

⁸⁸ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III, iv. The notions of compassion and narrative sympathy are the constituents of the attitudinal account.

⁸⁹ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 77

⁹⁰ Graham 1997, p. 114

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 128

'But why should she suppose that what counts in this conception is only "the story itself" and not "how the story is told"?' Raphael argues:

A plain history of Antigone, or Lear and Cordelia, or Emma Bovary, or Michael Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge, would clearly not give us the depth of understanding which comes from the language and the mode in which they are portrayed by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Flaubert, and Hardy.⁹⁴

If Graham, Sleinis, Norris and Raphael are correct that the enhanced apprehension of human experience furnished in literary discourse can reveal features of the ethical that are not available through traditional philosophical discourse, then the value of the propositional account for the connection between moral philosophy and imaginative literature is soundly based.

The Role of Plot

However, the amalgam of ethically significant content with a unique perspective, imaginative language and thought-provoking stylistic devices does not alone ensure sufficient material for substantive ethical reflection. To convey the full complexity of life and ethical decision making, a story needs to contain more than just these elements: it needs to structure its material in such a way as to make intelligible the ethical significance of its episodes. Herein lies a further important formal distinction between philosophical argument and creative literature: whereas a philosophical argument is a connected series of ideas that support a conclusion, an extended literary narrative consists in a connected series of events and episodes in some character's life. Moreover, if this is a valuable feature of literature's contribution to ethical reflection, then the novel, as the paradigm of extended connected narratives, is a particularly valuable supplement.

⁹³ Cora Diamond 'Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is,' in *New Literary History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-169

⁹⁴ D. D. Raphael, 'Response to Cora Diamond,' in *New Literary History*, *op. cit.*, p. 175

Arguably, the most valuable feature of the novel's contribution to ethical reflection is its ability to structure, contextualise, and make intelligible the narrated episodes of a character's life. This structuring is a function of a novel's plot. As Margaret Doody writes:

A novelist 'ties everything together,' weaving and unravelling the tissue of text. A novel must supply means by which the reader can create coherence. Without structures that induce coherence, even a story with very dashing characters or pretty settings or stunning *ekphraseis* will founder. We tend to think that what ensures sustained interest is 'a good story' – what has been called 'a good read.'⁹⁵

She chides Forster, who, in *Aspects of the Novel*, complains that a novel's story 'runs like a ... tapeworm, for its beginning and end are arbitrary.'⁹⁶ While he accepts that to a novel, its story is 'the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist,'⁹⁷ he wishes that it were not so. Forster seems to occupy a contradictory position concerning story and its value to the novel. On the one hand, he considers it necessary for the novel's existence – indeed, while he considers story to be 'the lowest and simplest of literary organisms,' he acknowledges that it is 'the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.'⁹⁸ For Forster, then, story seems to be a defining aspect of the genre. On the other hand, his 'wish that it were not so,' signals that the novel would somehow be a superior form of literary art were it not required to tell a story. But if story is, as he grudgingly concedes, an essential feature of the novel, then it is unintelligible to suppose that the two are separable. Indeed, if a novel is to count as a form of *narrative art*, whatever other features it may have, as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg argue, it must be distinguished by two characteristics: 'the presence of a story and a story-teller.'⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Margaret Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 142

⁹⁶ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), p. 26

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 27, 28

⁹⁹ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, 'The Narrative Tradition,' in R. M. Davis (ed.), *The Novel: modern Essays in Criticism*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 17

Forster's concern is that, in itself, the story is merely a device to keep the reader in suspense: 'Qua story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next.'¹⁰⁰ But success in this task is an insufficient measure of a novel's quality, and he argues that story alone fails to engage an important valuational aspect of the reader's experience. This unease over the value of story stems from his definition of story as a 'narrative of events arranged in their time sequence – dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on.'¹⁰¹ He argues that this requires a linear conception of narrative time that fails to accommodate the emphasis humans place on events, the value of which are not measured merely in terms of time, but in terms of their intensity. However, whatever else a novel might do, at the very least it must tell a story, and Doody attributes more value to the function of story than Forster allows. While Forster contends that the ordinances of matter and time, configured through story, are regrettable features of a novel ('Yes-' he writes, 'oh, dear, yes-the novel tells a story'¹⁰²), Doody responds that given the inevitable fate of temporal matter and the intensity with which humans reflect on death, 'they are no small things, and if the story gives us those, it gives us much.'¹⁰³ She considers that a 'good read' is one in which the 'offal and bones' of a story are configured in an intelligible temporality.¹⁰⁴

But Doody, like others, argues that this temporality need not be furnished sequentially. While between its covers, a novel's story has a beginning, middle and end, and, as Forster acknowledges, 'no novelist can deny time inside the fabric of his novel,'¹⁰⁵ there is no obligation to construct the narrative in any particular order except to achieve one or a number of effects, including suspense, or to make intelligible by their relations the relative importance of narrated events. The intensity of

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 27

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 42

¹⁰³ Doody, *loc cit.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

Stephen's anguish during the priest's sermon in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is intelligible only by reference to his earlier moral choice, indeed as a consequence of his choice. Imaginably, his anguish would be less intense, and its intensity less intelligible, were he merely contemplating alternatives in anticipation of making this choice; even less so if the reader were simply unaware of the dilemma that informs his anxiety. But the order in which these episodes are related is less important than their causal and valuational relations. For the anguish to be intelligible, the reader is required to apprehend its relation to another episode; and this apprehension may be effected either at the reading moment - in sequential order - or as a dawning of sorts during denouement. Thus, while temporality is important, narrated *sequence* is less so; most important is the significance of narrated events and their valuational, rather than their temporal, relations. According to Forster, a story *qua* story only narrates life in time and, in so doing, ignores that value attaches to events based on their importance rather than on their chronological position. Forster distinguishes between story and plot: while he confines the role of story to the arrangement of events according to their time sequence, he considers that a novel's plot configures episodes in such a way as to allow the reader to discern the causal and valuational relations of narrated events. In so doing, a novel's plot both configures episodes in an intelligible order and assigns each episode ethical significance relative not only to other episodes, but to the story itself. Plot thus makes intelligible a narrative's moral theme and, in so doing, illuminates the possibilities for ethical seriousness it represents. The importance of plot on the propositional account is clarified thereby. Moreover, in enhancing the reader's ability to grasp the nuances and complexities of ethical judgement and stimulate moral perceptions that may be unavailable through traditional philosophical discourse, the benefits envisaged in the attitudinal account are also realised.

In *On Stories*, Kearney draws on Paul Ricoeur when he observes, 'A story is made out of events, and the plot (*mythos*) is what mediates between

¹⁰⁵ Forster, *op. cit.*, p. 29

events and a story.'¹⁰⁶ A plot, in other words, gives the story a coherence that transcends synthesising the spatial and temporal relations of the characters, their actions and the settings in which they occur. By introducing and organising *causal* and *valuational* relations between the story's components, plot allows the reader to draw from the story an idea of the intricate and complex network of motives, relationships and other influences that infuse lived experience as it is represented in the narrative.

The role and value of representation will be discussed more fully later, but note that plot adds something extra to the narrative: a configured temporal and causal aspect that represents more truly the complexity of ethical reality with which the reader can identify and engage with. It is a feature of existential reality that our lives are often enmeshed in a tangled web of causal relations. Novels that offer insights concerning the ethical life will almost certainly reflect this feature of lived experience, and the configuration of causal relations will be central to its plot. However, the reader must still do some work in this regard. To be captivated by a story, a mature and reflective reader needs more than to be told what happened and why - part of a novel's full effectiveness lies in the reader's *engagement* with the plot in order to grasp its intricacies and the complex web of relations between the story's characters and events. This is one feature that makes a good story so compelling and, conversely, a compelling story so good. It also requires the reader to enter imaginatively into the story so as to grasp these relations and, hence, discover the ethical significance of the story as a whole. This, in turn, implies that the whole story configured by its plot is greater than the mere sum of its episodes.

While a clearer idea of the nature and significance of plot will be developed as the discussion unfolds, a serviceable contemporary definition of 'Plot' is given by John Cuddon:

The plan, design, scheme or pattern of events in a play, poem or work of fiction; and, further, the organisation of incident and

¹⁰⁶ Richard Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 130

character in such a way as to induce curiosity and suspense in the spectator or reader.¹⁰⁷

In echoing previous observations about the shortcomings of schematised examples and simple stories, he writes, 'In the space/time continuum of plot the continual question operates in three tenses: Why did that happen? Why is this happening? What is going to happen next - and why?' In facilitating answers to questions of the form 'Why...?', plot allows the reader to discern causal relations from a network of spatial and temporal relations. As Scholes and Kellogg write, 'Plot is, in every sense of the word, the articulation of the skeleton of narrative.'¹⁰⁸

A narrative's plot can take the form of a discreet thread running through the narrative, offering only subtle hints at the connections between temporally and spatially discrete characters, actions, episodes and incidents. The structure of Joyce's *Ulysses* comes to mind as an example of an amorphous plot which is subtly embedded in an otherwise seemingly discordant story filled with lacunae and 'zones of indetermination.' Ricoeur suggests that such works almost abandon the reader, who is left alone to carry the burden of emplotment. Many modernist novels of the early twentieth century fall into this category, exemplified particularly in the stream of consciousness novels by authors, in addition to Joyce, such as Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner; as do works by more contemporary writers such as Nadine Gordimer and Len Deighton. Alternatively, in what critics term 'middle-brow fiction,' the novel's plot can be an overt device intended to make the narrative's meaning obvious to a less reflective readership.

Whether the burden of emplotment is carried mainly by the reader or the author, wherever Cuddon's questions can intelligibly be asked of a narrative, and wherever that narrative incorporates some operation that permits cogent answers, there exists a discernible plot which, in Ricoeur's

¹⁰⁷ John Cuddon, ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary terms and Literary Theory*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 719

¹⁰⁸ Scholes and Kellogg, *op. cit.*, p. 23

way of thinking, draws configuration from succession, irrespective of the order in which the succession is portrayed. In an idea that comports with the propositional account examined here, Ricoeur holds that plot allows a narrative to lend intelligibility to abstract moral reasoning and, as such, can supplement a reader's practical understanding of the ethical life and its requirements. In 'Life in Quest of Narrative,'¹⁰⁹ Ricoeur advances the thesis that literary texts may be employed to:

... develop a sort of understanding that can be termed narrative understanding and which is much closer to the practical wisdom of moral judgement than to ... the theoretical use of reason.¹¹⁰

Like Norris, Nussbaum, Cunningham, Williams, McGinn and Phillips, Ricoeur argues that reflection on the moral situations depicted in literature can contribute to our practical understanding of morality and the human condition in a way that no abstract theoretical reasoning on moral principles can. He suggests that at least one function of imaginative literature is to:

... propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many *thought experiments* by which we learn to link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune.¹¹¹

Ricoeur maintains that narrative can add an intelligibility not otherwise evident in the theoretical disquisitions of traditional philosophical ethics. He cites Aristotle, who holds, 'every well-told story *teaches* something,'¹¹² to support his notion that the story 'reveals universal aspects of the human condition'¹¹³ in a way that is much closer to the 'practical wisdom of moral judgement.'¹¹⁴

An informed response to ethical questions addressed to the scene from *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, requires more than reflecting on the

¹⁰⁹ Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative' in *On Paul Ricoeur*, Ed. David Wood, (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 23-33

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 23

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 22

¹¹³ *ibid.*

reader's response to its pathos. Taken by itself, like the scene from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the extract from *Heart of Darkness* is merely an event, an episode in the life of the narrator, an otherwise heterogeneous passage from a book. Moreover, while we may possess the type of literary 'preunderstanding,' which Ricoeur terms *mimesis*,¹¹⁴ that allows us to discern meaning in the parts of speech and imagery employed by an author, without reading the extract in relation to the story in which it is positioned, we can only apprehend the passage as a semi-cohesive multiplicity of literary images.¹¹⁵ That we discern *some* meaning and cohesion is due to our possession of what Ricoeur terms our practical understanding of 'the symbolic resources of the practical field,' by which he means the reader's ability to comprehend the meaning of words, expressions, metaphors and other literary devices in the context of the narrative.¹¹⁶

The full moral import of the passage, however, does not emerge until we place it in the wider context of the story as a whole and see it as an instantiation of the narrative's ethical theme. According to Ricoeur, it is the operation of *emplotment* that allows the reader to position such an otherwise isolated episode, event or incident. Thus, emplotment performs a mediating function between the reader's preunderstanding of the narrative's symbolic resources (the complex of images, devices and parts of speech) and his or her understanding of the ethical significance of the story as a whole.

Ricoeur defines the operation of emplotment as: '...a synthesis of heterogeneous elements.'¹¹⁷ He enumerates three ways in which the mediating feature of emplotment occurs:

The mediation performed by the plot between the multiple incidents and unified story; the primacy of concordance over

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 23

¹¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 54ff

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 57

¹¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 21

discordance; and, finally, the competition between succession and configuration.¹¹⁸

First, emplotment synthesises all of the events contained in a story so that they can be understood in relation to the whole narrative. This synthesis is 'between the events or incidents which are multiple and the story which is unified and complete.'¹¹⁹ In this way, the plot around which Conrad's narrative is constructed positions the extract cited earlier among a complex of other events and in the wider context of the whole story. As Ricoeur writes, emplotment 'serves to make one story out of the multiple incidents or, if you prefer, transforms the many incidents *into one story*.'¹²⁰ Without emplotment, the moral theme that runs through *Heart of Darkness* would be fragmentary, and as elusive as the cause of Stephen Dedalus' moral anguish in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Emplotment serves also to render the whole narrative greater than the sum of its parts. According to Ricoeur:

the recounted story is always more than the enumeration, in an order that would be merely serial or successive, of the incidents or events that it organizes into an intelligible whole.¹²¹

In reflecting on Marlow's first encounter with the native workers, the reader may well form moral opinions concerning their apparent mistreatment; but without the synthesis afforded by emplotment, he or she would be left to ponder a number of unresolved issues: what is the purpose of Marlow's visit to the African shore? Who are the 'black shapes'? How did they land in such a predicament? Who, if anyone, deserves censure over this treatment in the first place? But perhaps most importantly from a narrative point of view, how does this scene fit into the story as a whole?

While this first feature concerns events that are primarily sequential and episodic, such as organising the way in which Conrad's narrative traces Marlow's progress upriver and into the 'heart of darkness,' and

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 22

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 21

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ *ibid.*

Joyce's narrative chronicles the vicissitudes of Dedalus' developing maturity, the second synthesising feature of emplotment involves the organisation of a story's apparently unconnected and totally heterogeneous elements. In this respect, according to Ricoeur, the narrative's plot:

organizes together components that are as heterogeneous as unintended circumstances, discoveries, those who perform actions and those who suffer them, chance or planned encounters, interactions between actors ranging from conflict to collaboration, means that are well or poorly adjusted to ends, and finally unintended results.¹²²

Emplotment affords a narrative scope for subsequent enrichments that augment the central theme and allow for the emergence of the story's ethical significance as the tangle of episodes, events and incidents is gradually unravelled to the reader. 'Gathering all these factors into a single story,' writes Ricoeur, 'makes the plot a totality which can be said to be at once concordant and discordant.'¹²³ As Ricoeur uses the term 'concordant discordance,' he accords primacy to concordance over discordance. In this way, emplotment allows the reader to discern narrative order (concordance) out of chaos (discordance) and also to determine, on reflection, how seemingly discordant elements contribute to the ethical significance of the story as a whole and how its composition leads to the narrative's conclusion. It is this feature which lends intelligibility and significance to Dedalus' ultimate expression of independence from Church, state and family, and which informs the declaration he makes to his friend Cranly: 'I will not serve.'¹²⁴

The final feature of emplotment concerns the way in which it configures a narrative's temporal characteristics. This feature, above all, allows the reader to apprehend the synthesis of heterogeneous elements and, ultimately, discern a coherent narrative. According to Ricoeur:

We could say that there are two sorts of *time* in every story told: on the one hand, a discrete succession that is open and

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ Joyce, *op. cit.*, p. 260

theoretically indefinite, a series of incidents; on the other hand, the story told presents another temporal aspect characterised by the integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives its particular configuration.¹²⁵

In the first sense, Ricoeur holds that the temporal aspect of emplotment imparts a linear quality to a narrative in which the reader can 'pose the question: and then? and then?'¹²⁶ This coherence allows the reader of *Heart of Darkness*, for example, to trace the chronology of events that led to Marlow's encounter with the native workers then to the story's culmination. It allows the reader to comprehend Dedalus' ultimate rejection of Church, family and state in favour of the 'reality of experience'¹²⁷ that may be encountered beyond the shackles of these connections. This, Ricoeur considers to be the episodic dimension of narrative which characterises the story as comprising of events or incidents in which time is represented as passage.

In the second sense, Ricoeur observes, 'composing a story is, from a temporal point of view, drawing a configuration out of a succession.'¹²⁸ Insofar as the succession is features time in the first sense, as passage, this configuring function of emplotment renders the story as a temporal totality. In explication of this idea in *Time and Narrative*, he characterises this mediating feature of emplotment as critical to the creative process:

This configurational act consists of "grasping together" the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents. It draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole.¹²⁹

The act of emplotment, according to Ricoeur, 'extracts a configuration from a succession.'¹³⁰ While time as passage allows the reader to discern a linear sequence of the story's episodes, it is the second sort of time employed by plot, time as duration, which gives the narrated story its temporal totality:

¹²⁵ Ricoeur, *loc. cit.*

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

¹²⁷ Joyce, *op. cit.*, p. 275

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1984, *op. cit.*, p. 66

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

If we may speak of the temporal identity of a story, it must be characterized as something that endures and remains across that which passes and flows away.¹³¹

The temporal aspect of emplotment allows the reader to 'move forward in the midst of contingencies and peripeteia under the guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfilment in the "conclusion" of a story.'¹³² This notion of the value of a novel's configuration corresponds with Graham's observation that in presenting material in a particular order, the novel allows readers to attribute ethical significance to its events by reference to their relations.¹³³ Perhaps most importantly, the way in which a novel configures material also allows readers to grasp the characters' moral decisions and their consequences. In Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for instance, our bewilderment over Tess Durbeyfield's reluctance to inform her betrothed, Angel Clare, of important aspects of her past would be all the greater for our not knowing of her mother's influence in the matter, revealed earlier in the narrative. In a letter responding to Tess' question concerning whether she should reveal to Clare that she had been raped by Alec D'Urberville who masqueraded as a distant relative of Tess, and that the illicit union had produced a child that subsequently died, her mother Joan, 'J,' writes:

Dear Tess, we are all glad to hear that you are going really to be married soon. But with respect to your question, Tess, J say between ourselves, quite private but very strong, that on no account do you say a word of your Bygone Trouble to him.¹³⁴

But while Tess does, for a while, conceal her bygone trouble from Clare, Hardy employs emplotment to leave us in no doubt about the mental anguish caused by her deceit. The extent of her moral turmoil is revealed to us before the wedding date is set, and in a climax of conscience she finally decides to reveal the truth:

¹³¹ Paul Ricoeur, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 22

¹³² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1984, *op. cit.*, p. 66

¹³³ Graham (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 124ff. See also p. 206 of this thesis, n. 49

¹³⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 191

...she resolved, with a bursting heart, to tell her story to Angel Clare, despite her mother's command – to let him for whom she lived and breathed despise her if he would, and her mother regard her as a fool, rather than preserve a silence which might be deemed a treachery to him, and which somehow seemed a wrong to these.¹³⁵

Tess chooses to inform Clare of her past in a letter she places under the door to his room. Unfortunately, it becomes concealed beneath the carpet and her fiancé never reads it. On the eve of the wedding, Tess is desperate to apprise Clare of her past trouble: 'I am so anxious to talk to you – I want to confess all my faults and blunders!'¹³⁶ But Clare will not hear of it, preferring to preserve the buoyant mood of the wedding day:

'No, no – we can't have faults talked of – you must be deemed perfect to-day at least, Sweet!' he cried. 'We shall have plenty of time, hereafter, I hope, to talk over our failings. I will confess mine at the same time.'¹³⁷

Thus Tess, 'swayed to accept the silence he presses on her by her appetite for joy',¹³⁸ delays her decision to reveal her past to Clare and, in so doing, prompts a chain of events that lead to her tragic demise. While Hardy has been criticised for the needlessly complicated and somewhat melodramatic nature of his plots,¹³⁹ emplotment makes intelligible the temporal dimension of the causal relations between events in Tess' life and her relationship with Clare, and helps the reader to understand the ethical significance and consequences of these relations.

Not all stories, however, have so clear a dénouement as to explicitly fulfil a reader's expectations. Many stories of 'great' literature are open-ended, with interpretative space for readers to form their own conclusions. As noted, Ricoeur understands emplotment as the ordering of events into a total action constitutive of the narrated story. But how does emplotment help a reader to discern the moral significance of the less structured

¹³⁵ *ibid.* p. 200

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 211

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ Margaret Higonnet, 'Introduction' to Thomas Hardy, *ibid.*, p. xxxi

¹³⁹ Frank O'Connor, *The Mirror in the Roadway*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), p. 244

narratives? Ricoeur addresses this point by arguing that emplotment alone is not sufficient to actualise the meaning of a story. The reader too must act for a narrative's didactic value to be realised:

And if emplotment can be described as an act of judgement and of the productive imagination, it is so insofar as this act is the joint work of the text and reader, just as Aristotle said that sensation is the common work of sensing and what is sensed.¹⁴⁰

For Ricoeur, readers ultimately complete the story; they configure narratives that are otherwise unfigured, such as, to cite his example, Joyce's *Ulysses*. He writes, 'in such extreme cases it is the reader, almost abandoned by the work, who carries the burden of emplotment.'¹⁴¹ Seymour Chatman accepts Ricoeur's account of the role of the reader in configuring and assigning causal significance to the sequence of a story's events. In 'Story and Narrative,' he argues that readers must often:

... fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits and objects for which various reasons have gone unmentioned. If in one sentence we are told that John got dressed and in the next that he rushed to an airport ticket counter, we surmise that in the interval occurred a number of artistically inessential yet logically necessary events: grabbing his suitcase, walking from the bedroom to the living room and out the front door, then to his car or to the bus or to a taxi, opening the door of the car, getting in and so on. The audience's capacity to supply plausible detail is virtually limitless, as is a geometer's to conceive of an infinity of fractional spaces between two points. Not, of course, that we do so in normal reading. We are speaking only of a logical property of narratives: that they evoke a world of potential plot details, many of which go unmentioned but can be supplied.¹⁴²

Accordingly, it is in the interaction between emplotment, the narrative, and the reader, augmented by the operations of configuration and reading, that the cognitive value of fictional narrative to a moral agent's practical understanding is revealed and developed. In short, while a story permits the reader to ask questions concerning what, where, how and when, plot allows the reader to address questions concerning *why*, and what

¹⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 76

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 77

significance attaches to events and their relations. It is through the representation of complexity that a plot helps the reader to distinguish between merely biological, episodic existence, and meaningfully lived and interpreted truly human life. As Hannah Arendt argues:

The chief characteristic of the specifically human life ... is that it is always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story.... It is of this life, *bios*, as distinguished from mere *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it "somehow is a kind of action (*praxis*)".¹⁴³

The importance of plot to situate these events and make intelligible their relations is clear. Moreover, the relevant difference between the two forms of life parallels the distinction between creative literature and traditional ethics. Arguably, in much of traditional ethics, the conception of a life most worth pursuing reflects a disembodied rationality that reduces all ethical decisions to considerations of duty, utility, or mutual interest, with exclusive focus on single, unconnected acts. On the other hand, the actions and attitudes of the literary characters, to whom we can fruitfully pay attention, reflect the complex motives, emotions, passions, ambitions, incentives, inclinations and dispositions that characterise real-life, concrete human existence. Plot forms the basis for literature's unique contribution to ethical reflection and accentuates the value of the distinction between philosophy and literature. As philosophical treatises do not have plots, philosophy cannot furnish the same positive contribution from within its own resources.

In investigating the ways in which literature can augment philosophical enquiry by increasing a reader's moral understanding, it emerges that Ricoeur's idea of emplotment provides a plausible account of the nexus between a narrative's moral theme and its reader's comprehension of its significance. As such, together with the contribution to ethical reflection envisaged in the attitudinal account, it shows how

¹⁴² Seymour Chatman, "Story and Narrative" in *Literature in the Modern World*, edited by Dennis Walder (Oxford: 1990) pp. 107-8

¹⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 72.

literature can supplement purely philosophical inquiry and contribute to the development of a moral agent's practical wisdom.

THE EXPANSION OF METHODS

Read not to contradict and refute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.

*Francis Bacon*¹

The central claim in the propositional account is that literature can significantly enhance reflection on ethics and ethical theory. Literary situations of moral seriousness can reveal things about ethics that could not emerge from a more direct, purely rational approach, in which moral concerns are abstracted from particular circumstances so as to formulate universal prescriptions for conduct. If the rigour, consistency, scope, perspicuity, and orderliness expected of philosophical ethics were sufficient to establish an adequate, problem free guide to life, then further enhancement would be superfluous. On the propositional account, imaginative literature can reveal and illuminate aspects of the moral life not accommodated in the universal and abstract reflections of purely philosophical ethics. In arguing that literature can effectively supplement

¹ Francis Bacon, 'Of Studies' in *Essays*, cited in David Crystal and Hilary Crystal, eds, *Words on Words*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 103

ethical reflection, McGinn draws on the formal differences between the two modes of discourse and regards the novel as the prime exemplar of this distinction:

The novel, in particular, is a text of a very different kind from a scientific treatise. It is also very different from the philosophical text, which is what philosophers, naturally, are most comfortable with.²

So construed, the cognitive contributions envisaged by the propositional account are valuable because moral philosophy belongs to a different species of reflection from that of metaphysics, logic, and mathematics. It is difficult to imagine the devices of metaphor, pathos, irony, satire, hyperbole, synecchdote, and allegory revealing very much about the axioms of mathematics, the principles of logic, or the ontology of universals. But these devices, common to imaginative literature, can augment philosophical attempts to understand ethics and ethical theories.

Kant and a Passage from Conrad

One plain reading of the scene from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reveals a clear message: it is wrong to use persons in the manner depicted, as mere means to some commercial end, and then discard them when their usefulness has passed. When active reflection reveals this theme, the parallels between the scene from *Heart of Darkness* and Kant's ethics also emerge. For Kant, the scene represents the natural consequences of an act of gross immorality. The workers have been used as mere means to someone's ends, and have had their dignity compromised thereby. This represents a clear transgression of the second formulation of the categorical imperative, which expresses Kant's notion of the intrinsic value of human dignity:

... morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that alone which has dignity. Skill and diligence in work have a market price; wit, lively imagination and humour have a fancy price; on the other hand, fidelity in promises and benevolence from basic principles (not from instinct) have an inner worth.

² McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 174

(AK 4: 435)

Conrad's passage and Kant's imperative offer two different expressions of the same attitude. While Kant prescribes a universal rule for moral conduct, *Heart of Darkness* constitutes a fictional representation of the plausible implications of its transgression. Herein lies part of literature's supplemental value. As a supplement to Kant's ethical reasoning, we have amplified his argument with a richer, concrete representation that speaks directly to what matters in a human life and character. By treating this passage as a convincing representation of how things could be, we can more clearly discern the possible real-world implications of the moral issue in question which, in turn, helps to refine our understanding of the categorical imperative and its demands.

Further, by reflecting on our responses to the scene, we can gain insights concerning our own moral understanding, insights that can reshape our moral views and enhance our capacities to make reality out of clarified ethical idea. Do we sympathise with the ill workers? Or, because their conditions of employment were 'legal', do we opine that their plight is just an unfortunate consequence of hard work in a harsh environment? Do we morally condemn the imperial traders who exploited them? Or do we regard their treatment of the workers as amoral, on the grounds that such treatment of humanity was acceptable, relative to the historical and social context in which it occurred? Perhaps we have always possessed some inclination that one ought not to treat persons only as means to an end, but were unaware of how strongly we embraced this principle until confronted by this depiction of human suffering. Further, how do we judge the moral value of the Marlow's actions - should he have done more than simply offer a biscuit to the dying man? Or do we evaluate his action as commensurate with the role of 'reporter', whereby wider society is alerted to the immoral conduct that he wishes to expose? Our responses to these questions determine how far we agree with Kant's position and, in turn, reveal the nature and scope of our own moral presuppositions. They also reveal how

certain moral perspectives from which this scene is viewed may have changed, been eroded, be found wanting or become impossible for people. Reflection on these factors enlarges the capacity to recognise and evaluate situations of moral seriousness, and act accordingly. In this way literature, while not a substitute for philosophy, can supplement traditional philosophical reflection by adding an extra dimension to the understanding of moral issues.

The scene from *Heart of Darkness* represents indisputable moral significance. It sheds light on the connection between Kant's ethics with its focus on the preservation of human dignity and exploitative practices that serve dubious ends. But what of the immersed judgement of particular actions? For Kant, ethical value attaches only to the operations of the will. And then only by reference to an agent's willing to obey the moral law for its own sake, rather than as a means for the attainment of some other end. Leaving aside the broader questions concerning an individual's ethical relation to the institutions and practices that cause suffering on a scale represented in *Heart of Darkness* (i.e. concerning how Marlow ought to conduct himself in relation to the imperial traders and, ultimately, the sovereign powers that endorse their practices), what can be made of the ethical significance of Marlow's interaction with the worker to whom he offered a biscuit? To extend the role that literature can play in moral philosophy, I propose to argue that evaluating a character's actions and attitudes in light of a particular theory can not only reveal the ethical significance of those actions and attitudes, it can also reveal important facets of the theory itself that may be overlooked or receive too little attention in a purely rational inquiry. For example, an examination of one aspect of Marlow's contact with the workers – his offering a biscuit to the dying man – illuminates a further aspect of Kant's ethics, one which is central to his account of moral value.

Marlow's gesture seems to accord with a moral duty stipulated in Kant's ethics. Indeed, in enumerating a number of duties to illustrate his

reasoning in the *Groundwork*, Kant employs a similar notion in the last of four examples of duties derivable from the categorical imperative. He writes that a prosperous person who withholds charity is acting contrary to reason, because, as there could be many instances in which persons (including himself) require the 'love and sympathy' of others, he could not reasonably will that a principle of miserliness should become a universal law of nature (AK 4: 423). In light of Kant's argument, it is difficult to imagine that the maxim of Marlow's act of simple generosity could not be willed to become a universal law. That is, it is consistent with reason that the 'subjective principle of volition' which motivates an individual's act of generosity should become what Kant calls an objective principle: such as would serve as a practical law that is grasped through the categorical imperative and which applies to all rational beings at all times.³ It is not surprising, therefore, that, because Kant regards beneficence as a duty, Marlow's gesture deserves 'praise and encouragement' (AK 4: 398). What may be surprising, however, is that Kant would reckon the maxim of Marlow's act to be wholly unworthy of moral esteem.

For Kant, 'it is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a **good will**.' (AK 4: 393). Kant's point is that ethical value cannot be attributed to actions or events. Kant's position here has its consummate literary embodiment in the revelation experienced by Angel Clare in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Having morally condemned Tess after learning of her rape by Alec D'Urberville and its tragic consequences, and of her failure to disclose these events to him prior to their marriage, Clare travels to Brazil to be away from her. There he witnesses events that not only broaden his general outlook, but which also allow him to put into perspective the egregious event in Tess' past, and her reasons for not revealing it to him. In a revelation that echoes Kant's own realisation of the

³ Kant's definition of a maxim as a 'subjective principle of volition' and his explanation for its transition to an objective principle appear in a footnote to the *Groundwork*, (AK 4: 421). He offers a fuller account in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, (1788, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 17 (AK 5: 19).

locus of moral value, Clare discovers that, for him, evaluation of acts and their consequences alone are not sufficient to justify moral approbation or condemnation:

During this time of absence he had mentally aged a dozen years. What arrested him now as of value in life was less its beauty than its pathos. Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. He thought they wanted re-adjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman? The beauty and ugliness of character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed.⁴

Clare's insight is reflected in Tess' almost simultaneous realisation that, given her lack of intention to submit to D'Urberville's seduction, her husband's judgement of her is too harsh:

...her husband, Angel Clare herself, had dealt out hard measure to her, surely he had! She had never before admitted such a thought; but he had surely! Never in her life – she could swear it from the bottom of her soul – had she ever intended to do wrong; yet these harsh judgements had come. Whatever her sins, they were not sins of intention, but of inadvertence, and why should she have been punished so persistently?⁵

Tess is not a willing participant in some licentious affair that might justifiably attract her husband's moral censure; rather, she was the victim of her phoney cousin's hunger for sexual dominance over a pretty and vulnerable young girl. Indeed, she was in a drugged sleep at the time of the rape and thus can hardly be held morally responsible for her participation. Both Tess and Clare share the realisation that moral value derives from the agent's intention to act in a certain way, rather than in the act itself or its consequences. Accordingly, it is unreasonable to condemn Tess for her involvement in events over which she had no control, and in which she had no intention of participating. This realisation brings Tess to condemn Clare's denunciation, and Clare to forgive Tess the events in her past, and

⁴ Hardy, *op. cit.*, p. 340

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 353

to beg her forgiveness for his unjust reproach. For their relationship, however, and for Tess' life, it is too late.

For Kant, there are no 'good' or 'bad' actions - ethical value resides only in the will which informs their performance. In the context of Kantian ethics, a clue to the moral value of Marlow's gesture is in the text. It comes in his tacit admission that he felt he had no choice but to act the way that he did: 'What else could I do but to offer him one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket.' As an act of generosity, his gesture is undoubtedly in accord with the moral law. However, the rhetorical phrase 'What else could I do...?' implies a lack of choice in the matter (at least he considers this to be the case); and in the absence of any external coercion to make the gesture, we must deduce that Marlow's sense of impotence was due to the operation of some internal compulsion.

From his admission, we can infer that Marlow offered the biscuit to the dying man not because of some operation of the will, but from a direct inclination to sympathy. This is an important distinction in Kantian ethics because for Kant, the moral import of any action turns on whether it was performed from volition (which implies an act of will) or from some inclination in the agent. According to Kant, all distinctively *moral* value derives from reason alone. In the *Groundwork*, he emphasises that an act can only be regarded as good by reference to its being performed *from* a duty derivable from the categorical imperative, the only means by which an agent can apprehend the moral law. He identifies as the 'third proposition of morality' that '*Duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law*' (AK 4: 400). He argues:

... an action from duty is to put aside entirely the influence of inclination and with it every object of the will; hence there is left for the will nothing that could determine it except objectively the *law*, and subjectively *pure respect* for this practical law, and so the maxim of complying with such a law even if it infringes upon all my inclinations. (AK 4: 400-1)

The performance of an act *in accordance* with duty under the law but performed from some other motivation such as love, instinct, sympathy, or

prudence, is morally insignificant, however otherwise praiseworthy. We saw that Marlow's gesture, while in accord with the moral law, was performed from an inclination to sympathy or some other compulsion and not out of respect for the moral law. In Kant's eyes, therefore, while honourable, the act has no intrinsic moral worth:

To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction of spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth ... for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*. (AK 4: 398)

However, Kant's emphasis on duty has drawn criticism from philosophers who argue that the moral value of acts, attitudes and forms of character that constitute the ethical life cannot be reduced to questions of duty alone. As Graham writes:

... the emphasis he [Kant] places upon moral goodness residing in our will or intention to do our duty and not in the good or bad consequences of our action is mistaken, since a complete divorce between intention, action and outcome is impossible.⁶

Philosophers who hold this view maintain that Marlow's gesture possesses moral value because the sympathy which motivated his offering the biscuit is itself ethically valuable, irrespective of its relation to the moral law. They would further argue that if it brought even a glimmer of happiness to the dying man (whether from being the recipient of a small gift, the object of compassion, or the recognition on the part of another human being that he is member of a common humanity), then value also attaches to the *consequences* of the act, even if it were performed from inclination rather than duty. One valuable function of literature in presenting an ethical perspective is that it can draw critical attention to features of a theory that conflict with other, perhaps more deeply seated ethical concepts. Kant's

⁶ Graham 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 118

dismissal as non-moral of otherwise highly valued traits such as sympathy, generosity and compassion exemplifies this kind of dissonance.

Indeed, Jonathan Bennett argues *perforce* that sympathy in particular deserves to be accorded greater moral weight than it is normally given in predominant ethical theories such as Kant's. He employs Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a literary example to support his argument that one's sympathies can sometimes better guide one's actions and attitudes than can one's moral principles, because not all morality, as a set of principles that guide one's behaviour, is good morality. In 'The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn,' Bennett examines the relation between sympathy and what he calls 'bad morality.'⁷ To illustrate his argument for the value of sympathy over rigid adherence to moral principles, he compares the actions and attitudes of the Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler and the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards with those of Huck Finn. He concludes that, while Himmler and Edwards each acted on a set of clear moral principles (the former according to his perception of duty, the latter to his Puritan beliefs), their rigid adherence to these principles gave rise to undesirable and even horrid consequences and, as such, constitute examples of bad morality. The actions of Huck Finn, on the other hand, which are influenced more by his intuitive sympathy than by any explicit moral principle, indeed which expressly contravene a dominant moral principle (that which enjoins one to respect another's right to own slaves), are morally superior. To illustrate this argument, and show how literature can help to amplify the issues, it suffices to compare the actions and attitudes of only two agents; and because the moral conflict at issue is most evident in Himmler's situation, Bennett's analysis of Jonathan Edwards will be omitted here.

Bennett argues that Himmler retained his sympathies for human suffering and, in so doing, paid a price for suppressing his feelings in favour of his perceived duty. This price is foretold in the Nazi leader's

⁷ Jonathan Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," in *Philosophy*, 49, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), reprinted in Pojman (2000), *op. cit.*, pp. 441-455

admission that personally overseeing the implementation of Hitler's command to execute millions of innocent people will be '...a great burden for me to bear.'⁸ The result of bearing this burden manifested itself physically, inasmuch as his physician reports that he 'suffered a variety of nervous and physical disabilities, including nausea and stomach-convulsions.'⁹ But Himmler seemed resigned to the cost of committing to his decision to support Nazi policy, regarding it merely as a consequence of the realisation of greater ends. Indeed, in considering the clash between his will to perform his duty and his sympathy towards those whose suffering his policies caused, Himmler described himself as being caught in 'the old tragic conflict between will and obligation.'¹⁰ Bennett argues that, whatever the burden and its effects, Himmler's preparedness to carry it is grounded in 'a set of principles that constituted his morality – a sick, bad, wicked morality.'¹¹

It is a bad morality to be sure, but a morality nevertheless, one to whose principles Himmler was fully prepared to commit. However, as Graham argues, 'bad actions become truly evil when they are freely, deliberately, and sincerely performed.'¹² He claims that in cases like these, recourse to Kant's categorical imperative may not resolve this kind of moral conflict. Graham argues that the universalisability condition stipulated in the categorical imperative, though it informs the 'Kantian ethics of intention'¹³ and constitutes the basis for an unambiguous moral principle, is unconscionable in cases that entail a dubious maxim. He develops the hypothetical case of the 'consistent Nazi' to illustrate his position. The *consistent* Nazi he says, 'is the person who acts on the maxim "This person should be exterminated because he or she is a Jew."¹⁴ Graham argues that, given certain fundamental socio-political convictions, testing this maxim by

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 448

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Graham (1990), *op. cit.*, p. 116

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

an appeal to the universalisability condition may well require that it be positively endorsed by the consistent moral agent. Therefore, if one willed that the extermination of Jews become a universal law, then one is bound by the categorical imperative to act accordingly and endorse genocide. While I have some reservations accepting that such a law may wilfully be universalisable in Kant's sense, that is, a law accepted by all moral agents rather than one that can be generalised merely by a subset of moral agents, I take Graham's point insofar as it illustrates that consistency alone is an insufficient guide to moral conduct. The convictions behind Himmler's adherence to his morality are evident in his claim that 'it is the curse of greatness that it must step over dead bodies to create new life. Yet we must ... cleanse the soil or it will never bear fruit.'¹⁵ Thus Himmler regarded his overseeing the implementation of genocide, however emotionally burdensome, as his clear moral duty. However, as Graham argues, 'if a policy of genocide is deeply mistaken from a moral and every other point of view, consistency in its application is hardly an improvement.'¹⁶

To be sure, Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, the dignity principle, specifically prevents the situation exemplified in Graham's case of the consistent Nazi. One cannot universalise a maxim which entails the use of humanity as mere means to one's own ends, even when its use is seen to be for a greater cause, such as ethnic purity. But in order to recognise the applicability and force of Kant's dignity principle, one must first recognise the humanity of one's victims and, in so doing, acknowledge them fully as other perspectives on the world. This requires sympathy – the ability to see the world from another's point of view. Certainly, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant acknowledges a role for sympathy which parallels his view on the amiability of beneficence, and argues that it is an indirect duty to possess certain 'sensitive feelings' and, as he writes, 'not to shun sickrooms and prisons and so on in order to avoid the pain of

¹⁵ Bennett, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 117

compassion.¹⁷ Cunningham suggests that one way to interpret Kant's notion 'is to conclude that without the motivational impetus of sensitive feeling, we may not be able to get ourselves to do what our duty commands, even though we can understand the command perfectly well.'¹⁸ But, as he also points out, accepting this interpretation presents Kantian ethics with a serious contradiction given his account of the purity of moral motivation. If reason alone is sufficient to reveal our binding moral duties, and if all non-rational dispositions such as sympathy are to be excised from moral consideration, then how can his ethics account for the 'indirect' duties of these sensitive feelings? Cunningham offers another interpretation of the role for sympathy and its moral value, one which is not accommodated in Kantian ethics, but which nonetheless appears to comport with our more deeply seated moral convictions:

The better way to interpret the assistance of sensitive feelings is not as a reinforcement of the will but as an assistant to the understanding. Without firsthand (or vicarious) experience of suffering, we may not be able to recognize chances for beneficence, and our vigilance for the same may be poor.¹⁹

Cunningham's point emerges with special clarity in a passage from J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Lives of Animals*, in which Elizabeth Costello reflects on the Nazi perpetrators of genocide's inability to put themselves in the shoes of their victims:

The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another.... There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity, and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it...there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.²⁰

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, part II (*Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*), in *Ethical Philosophy: The Complete Texts of Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, and Metaphysical Principles of Virtue, Part II of The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), p. 457

¹⁸ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 76

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 77

²⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). p. 35. Kearney also uses the same passage to illustrate his account of the role for narrative sympathy.

Himmler belongs to the last class of persons nominated by Costello: those who have the capacity to exercise sympathy, to recognise another's humanity, yet who, in choosing not to exercise it, deny the moral authority of the dignity principle while reassuring themselves that, despite the inner tension, they are acting according to duty.

Bennett uses the term 'sympathy' to 'cover every sort of fellow-feeling, as when one feels pity over someone's loneliness, or horrified compassion over his pain, or when he feels a shrinking reluctance to act in a way which will bring misfortune to someone else.'²¹ He distinguishes sympathy as a *feeling* for others from making actual moral judgements about persons or situations: 'My sympathy for someone in distress may lead me to help him, or even to think that I ought to help him; but in itself it is not a judgement about what I ought to do but just a *feeling* for him in his plight.'²²

Himmler suppressed his sympathy for others in order to willingly perform what he saw as his moral duty. To an extent then, it is his sincerity here, his wilful suppression of his inclination to sympathy and denial of another's humanity, that makes him truly evil. Huck Finn, on the other hand, chooses to help his friend Jim the slave escape from his owner, despite his belief that doing so contravenes the demands of his community's prevalent morality. In so doing, he suppresses his inclination to duty and acts out of sympathy for his friend. A quotation from the novel exemplifies this tension:

Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well I can tell you it made me all trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he *was* most free – and who was to blame for it? Why, *me*. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no matter nor no way....It hadn't ever come home to me, before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it stayed with me, and scorched with me more and more. I tried to make out to myself that *I* warn't to blame, because I didn't help Jim run off from his rightful owner;

²¹ Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 442-443

²² *ibid.*, p. 443

but it warn't no use, conscience up and say, every time: "but you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you coulda paddled ashore and told somebody." That was so – I couldn't get around that, no way. That was where it pinched. Conscience says to me: "What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean?..." I got to feeling so mean and miserable I most wished I was dead.²³

It is evident from this passage that Huck's turmoil stems from the conflict between what his fellow-feelings toward another human being tell him to do and what he sees as 'right' by reference his community's values. While in contemporary society there would be no such conflict - both morality and sympathy would dictate the assistance of Jim's escape - as Bennett observes, in the rural Missouri of Huck's childhood, 'slave-owning is just one kind of ownership and is not subject to critical pressure.'²⁴ Just as clear as Himmler's duty to endorse and perpetrate genocide is to him, so does turning Jim into the authorities present itself to Huck as the right thing to do. But unlike Himmler, Huck lacks, as he sees it, the 'strength' to do the 'right' thing. In Elizabeth Costello's terms, Huck has the capacity to imagine himself in Jim's shoes and, despite pressure to do otherwise, chooses to exercise it. As Bennett writes, 'in this conflict between sympathy and morality, sympathy wins.'²⁵

What does the passage from *Huckleberry Finn* show? First, as Bennett argues, it illuminates 'the difference between general moral principles and particular unreasoned emotional pulls.'²⁶ Huck thinks knows the right action to take, and he knows it by reference to the moral principles that guide behaviour in his society. But Huck's conceding to the dictates of sympathy over duty reveals that, at least in Huck's case, his rational apprehension of moral duty is attenuated by his sympathy for Jim. And that his actions are evaluated as morally right despite their divergence from

²³ *ibid.*, p. 444

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 445

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

established moral principles, reveals something about the principles themselves. It shows that principles that support the ownership of human beings as slaves and that enshrined the property rights of their masters, despite being principles that supposedly hold by reference to reasoned argument alone, fail to embody what truly matters in human life and character. Namely, that dignity and autonomy matter to all persons, irrespective of race or creed. In other words, these principles constitute bad morality.

Therefore, just as sympathy can guide one's apprehension of a situation's ethical significance, so it can reveal the extent to which a moral position fails fully to accommodate one's ethical priorities. Cunningham argues that the capacity to see the world from another's point of view is vital to the development of an ethical consciousness, the ability to apprehend ethical significance and direct one's will accordingly:

If we know little or nothing about what brings pain and pleasure to actual human beings, or if we fail to develop the practical habits that can provide us with greater knowledge of the same by keeping our eyes on the landscape of suffering, all the good will in the world won't accomplish much for all its beneficent but largely idle intent.²⁷

But this is not to suggest that sympathy alone ought to guide one's ethical actions, and, as such, reduce all ethical deliberations to a species of subjectivism. One's own inchoate ethical priorities may be wrong: just because Kantian ethics does not accommodate Himmler's conception of duty, it does not mean that he is justified in embracing a new theory that does. Rather, sympathy, the faculty whereby one is able to see the world through the eyes of another, alerts one to the consequences for the other of acting in a certain ways and, as such, can reveal the extent to which these consequences are not accommodated in theories that prescribe those actions, and to the ethical significance of consequences *per se*. As Cunningham observes, 'pure practical reasoning cannot help much when it comes to contingent, empirical facts and details of human life and

²⁷ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 77

character.'²⁸ That is, *ceteris paribus*, we can know what an ethical theory requires us to do in certain situations; but in the contingent, empirical realm of complex human life, all things are rarely equal.

Moreover, ethical sensitivity, the development of which can be aided by sympathetically attending to the complex pictures of human life and character presented in literature, also helps the moral agent realise the extent to which life is a shared journey. Reflecting on one's responses to situations depicted in literature, and comparing these responses to those of the immersed characters ('Yes, I would do what Huck did, absolutely...'), can reveal cross-cultural and -temporal parallels the acknowledgement of which brings us one step closer to the ideal of a global ethic. As Gaita argues:

Some experiences are common to all human beings. They are responses to what R. F. Holland called the 'big facts' of human life – our mortality, our sexuality, our vulnerability to suffering, and so on. The commonness of these experiences is thought to transcend culture, even though different cultures make different things of them. It sometimes includes the thought, often voices outside of philosophy, that human beings are at bottom the same, and that were we to fully acknowledge it, then that would of itself place certain ethical limits on our conduct.²⁹

In presenting the world from another's viewpoint, and in thus eliciting the reader's empathy, literature can reveal not only the extent to which sympathy ought to be accommodated as a force in our lives, but also that reason alone may be insufficient to place needed limits on our conduct. That is to say, insofar as rational principles alone are inadequate to cover the complexity of human life and character, traits such as sympathy, empathy and compassion aid the understanding of a principle's applicability to particular situations and give the moral agent the impetus to act. As Frankena writes, 'I am inclined to think that traits without principles are blind, but principles without traits are impotent.'³⁰

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Raimond Gaita, in Adamson, et al, *op. cit.*, p. 269

While adherence to the dignity principle ought to overcome the objection embodied in Graham's case of the consistent Nazi, and while attention to one's sympathetic response to others may reveal the extent to which certain principles speak to the heart of what matters in ethics, the implication of the categorical imperative that all rational beings ought to be regarded identically draws criticism from philosophers who argue that its account of a morally binding maxim ignores the special bonds that define our relationships with those to whom we are intimately attached. As Cunningham argues:

... for all its welcome appeals to the basic dignity we all share, Kantian ethics errs by fitting everything that matters morally under the umbrella of respect for equally worthy rational human beings.³¹

This criticism implies that, in practice, human beings frequently make, and should make, moral decisions based on a more nuanced, ordinal appreciation of the effects of their actions on others: offspring, parents, siblings, neighbours, friends, enemies, and workmates. Cunningham objects to Kantian ethics on the grounds that it fails to accommodate the priority humans naturally assign to intimate attachments and, in so doing, it 'leaves out or twists all sorts of intimate attachments that provide shape and meaning to our lives.'³²

Defenders of Kantian ethics might argue that Cunningham's objection rests on a fundamental misconstruction of Kant's critical project. As noted earlier, in seeking to determine the conditions for 'pure' morality and, in so doing, isolate an *a priori* metaphysics of morals from the 'foreign addition of empirical inducements' (AK 4: 400), Kant deliberately excludes all subjective motivations to act, including those which constitute our inclinations to sympathy, beneficence, compassion, prudence, and the natural priority given to intimate attachments. In isolating the principle on the basis of which moral action is performed, Kant believes that we can

³⁰ Frankena, *op. cit.*, p. 65

³¹ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 2

³² *ibid.*, p. 3

come to know precisely what makes a good action good. Once we know this, we come to apprehend the moral law which, as autonomous citizens of the kingdom of ends, we impose on ourselves via the categorical imperative. Therefore, as the moral law has claim over all rational beings, moral value must reside in their *will* to act from duty to obey the moral law. As we saw in the scene from *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's gesture fails to qualify as a moral action because it was not motivated by an obligation derived *a priori* from the categorical imperative. As the categorical imperative defines moral duty, *inclinations* to act well fall outside its ambit and, however otherwise admirable, are excluded from purely ethical considerations. For Kant, our actions are endowed with moral value by reference to the presence of a good will to correct our volitions and, by conformity with universalisable maxims, bring them 'into conformity with universal ends' (AK 4: 393). The locating of moral value in the will is crucial to Kant's account of ethics because, he believes, it serves to bring out by contrast the most fundamental principle of morality and makes it 'shine forth all the more brightly' (AK 4: 397). It also serves to reinforce Kant's argument for the non-reductive uniqueness of moral value and places moral experience, in all its varieties, on his own foundation.

This reasoning is exemplified in the person who refrains from murdering an innocent only for fear of being caught and punished. While the would-be murderer's refraining is consistent with the moral law which proscribes murder, it is difficult to imagine that an examination of that person's motives would conclude that he or she acted morally, irrespective of the outcome of the act (the potential victim's being spared). Thus the potential murderer's prudence, like all other inclinations, must be excluded from the realm of distinctly ethical motives.

However, the prudence of a potential murderer belongs to a different species of inclinations and dispositions from those we have towards our loved ones and, as Cunningham notes, it must be acknowledged 'that intimate bonds assume a large place within the life

plans of most people.’³³ As such, they occupy a special position in our conception of the ethical life, one which conflicts with Kant’s conception of the kingdom of ends as a ‘systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws’ (AK 4: 433). When, in a situation of moral conflict, the categorical imperative requires the agent to choose between furthering the interests of just anybody and those of an intimate attachment, the argument runs that he or she is naturally, powerfully and justifiably inclined to regard the interests of the intimate as prior to the other person’s. Because intimate attachments are informed by love rather than an agent’s fidelity to abstract principles, and because love is held to be basic to our conception of ‘life as we might know it at our best,’³⁴ the excessive emphasis that Kantian ethics places on universality can ‘squeeze out, ignore or deform’³⁵ aspects of life that really matter, such as the place in our lives we accord to intimate attachments. How are we to account for the ethical aspects of the relationship between the Biafran mother and her dying son in purely rational terms? Her attention to her child is informed by manifestly non-rational motives – she prioritises her son’s interests, even in his dying moments, not out of respect for the moral law, nor from duty, but from love. One can imagine her sacrificing her own interests, and her duties to further those of others, to continue to ease her son’s last moments. And in attending to her relationship with her son, it is difficult to condemn her lack of attention to duties to others that may be prescribed in the universal moral law. Moreover, while her relationship with her son is non-rational, it is unequivocally ethical: wheresoever our actions impinge on or affect the lives of others, they have an ethical dimension. Thus Achebe’s poem describes a proximity relation between the parent and her offspring that transcends questions of universal moral duty, and is not accommodated in Kantian ethics. It is not difficult to imagine situations in which her attention to the child conflicts with her ability to fulfil other duties derived from the

³³ *ibid.*, p. 48

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 3

categorical imperative, yet it is difficult to imagine the grounds on which her attention to him at the cost of rejecting other duties may be censured. However, Cunningham argues that attention to the moral place of intimate attachments and inclinations such as compassion and beneficence need not fall outside all rational considerations of the moral law. Indeed, as he suggests, their cultivation may even contribute to our apprehension of its requirements:

Conceivably, my roles as son, brother, friend, spouse, and father may help awaken me to the needs of my fellow beings and develop loving sentiments that parallel the spirit of the moral law and express my complete fidelity.³⁶

Considerable recent scholarship has been devoted to investigating the role for virtuous dispositions and the place for intimate attachments in Kantian ethics and whether they can be successfully defended against charges such as those made by Cunningham.³⁷ While Cunningham's claim that intimate bonds are a central feature of an agent's life is persuasive, he still needs to explain the ethical importance of this observation and identify the reasons why it should carry normative force. However, if these considerations are basic to our conception of life, as he suggests, and as such ought to inform the normative features of ethical theory, and if it is true that Kant's conception of morality does not adequately accommodate the importance we attach to human dispositions and intimate attachments, then proponents of Kantian ethics must look beyond the categorical imperative for a corrective to this inadequacy. Cunningham argues that the Kantian perspective excludes, ignores or deforms the things that matter, and that this is revealed by examining the particular concerns of concrete moral agents:

The error of Kantian ways and, more generally, the errors of ethical theory can best be corrected by a moral philosophy that pays attention to particular people leading particular lives,

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 48

³⁷ See for example Barbara Herman *The Practice of Moral Judgement*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

complete with the rich emotional attachments that are prey and sometimes prone to conflict.³⁸

According to Cunningham, reading and reflecting on serious literature can play a unique and valuable role in the development of such a philosophy. To this end, he places great value on the insider's perspective furnished by imaginative literature. He argues:

By providing detailed depictions of the complex inner life of fictional characters embroiled in the messy business of living, fine literature directs our attention to the subtleties and nuances of what should rightly command our attention.³⁹

While it must be acknowledged that Kant can pack a great deal and variety of moral experience into a universalised maxim, the suggestion here is that, in providing a more realistic view of individual persons *in situ* than can be accommodated in abstract and general principles, literature is better able than unaided philosophical reflection to accommodate the complexities of ethical decision-making, including reflection on the identification and universalisation of maxims. As such, literature can depict the complex network of attachments that shapes our sense of what matters in a human life and character and which, in Kantian terms, must be accommodated in our maxims for action.

However, it is not the principal object here to determine whether Cunningham's main criticism of Kantian ethics is decisive or whether it constitutes a misconstruction of the fundamental aims of Kant's project. Rather, it is to show that attention to a literary depiction of moral seriousness can reveal important features of an ethical perspective that may have been lost or received too little emphasis in the philosophical discourse from which it arose. If it is true that moral philosophy must pay attention to particular lives, then it seems that literature can furnish the ideal supplement in the form of almost limitless detailed depictions of complex characters and situations. Examining Kant's theory in light of an intuitive response to Marlow's situation in *Heart of Darkness* reveals aspects of his

³⁸ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 3

ethics that are worthy of further critical attention. Thus revealed, the philosopher may then consider what implications follow from within that perspective, and what considerations bear on it from outside; and perhaps most of all, as Williams notes, 'what would be implied by certain ways of thinking about the situations' so depicted.⁴⁰ Moreover, incorporating literature into ethical reflection in this way, employed as a source of material with which to inform argument, illustrate claims and counterclaims, and raise questions concerning an ethical perspective, is entirely consistent with the dialectic method for moral philosophy described by Graham and discussed in the previous chapter.⁴¹ If examples and counterexamples have value in moral argument, then the detail, complexity, and plausibility of literary examples must be useful in eliciting and examining the implications of ethical positions.

Aside from the criticisms concerning its excessive emphasis on the moral value of duty, and despite its philosophical rigour and illuminating appeal to universal respect for human dignity, Kant's ethical theory presents at least one major practical difficulty. While the scene from *Heart of Darkness* can illustrate aspects of his theory and alert us to their possible real-world implications, it fails to address a major problem in his universal prescription for moral conduct: the dilemma presented by competing obligations. If we must always act in such a way that we could will that our maxim become a universal law, then how is the agent to decide what is right when the categorical imperative requires that one act (such as not lying) in a way that yields a decidedly negative outcome for another moral agent (such as death)? This conflict is recognisable in the example of the inquiring murderer, in which objectors to Kant argue that a universal prescription for truthfulness enjoins an agent to tell the truth at all times, even though doing so would reveal the whereabouts of a vicious

³⁹ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 3

⁴⁰ Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' in Ted Honderich and Myles Burnyeat (eds.), *Philosophy As It Is* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 37.

⁴¹ Graham (1990), pp. xiii-xiv. See also chapter one of this thesis.

murderer's innocent victim, and that this prescription clearly contradicts an intuitive sense of what constitutes justifiable grounds for moral compromise. While some philosophers argue that this objection rests on a misunderstanding of the categorical imperative,⁴² Kant himself held that it is always wrong to lie, even from altruistic motives. Nevertheless, the case is invoked in defence of moral theories in which value turns on the *consequences* of an action rather than the will or intention of its actors.

Utilitarianism and a Passage from Conrad

Utilitarianism offers a deceptively simple solution to the moral dilemma presented by the inquiring murderer.⁴³ In act utilitarianism, moral evaluation turns solely on the consequences of an action, expressed in terms of utility (which, for the purposes of simplicity, will here be equated to happiness). Thus the agent whose actions bring about the greater amount of happiness to the greatest number of people possesses moral priority. In the case of the inquiring murderer, the utilitarian recognises no moral dilemma: unless the murderer's disappointment at missing the intended victim outweighs the happiness that results in the intended victim's reprieve, then the greatest good can only be produced by lying about the victim's whereabouts. The utilitarian's supreme moral principle enjoins that we always act to bring about the balance of greatest happiness over unhappiness. And this holds for the utilitarian even when the production of such a favourable outcome requires other agents to be treated as a means to the end stipulated by the Greatest Happiness

⁴² Rachels, *op. cit.*, p. 126. Rachels argues that lying is acceptable under the categorical imperative provided that the agent violates the rule proscribing lying 'for a reason that we would be willing for anyone to accept' were they in the same position as the agent. It falls outside the scope of this thesis to examine whether or not this account of the categorical imperative is true to the spirit of Kant's ethics.

⁴³ I acknowledge that there are many forms of utilitarianism and that the theory continues to develop. My aim here is to illustrate how literature can be used to reveal issues concerning utilitarianism generally and I believe that examining the 'classical' version of the theory in light of literary examples serves to illustrate my argument most effectively. A distinction between two forms of classical utilitarianism must also be noted – that between Act and Rule utilitarianism. In this section I am principally concerned with elucidating act utilitarianism.

Principle. Therefore, provided that the utilitarian can demonstrate that the suffering of a relative few contract workers is outweighed by the economic benefits derived from the fruits of this suffering, then the exploitation depicted in Conrad's passage is not merely morally acceptable, but strictly morally required.

Moreover, the sympathy felt towards the exploited workers, and one's disapproval of the dehumanising effect of such a calculation, obtains only marginal consideration in determining the balance of happiness over unhappiness. In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill specifies the conditions under which an agent must evaluate the morality of any given situation: '...utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.'⁴⁴

When subjected to rational analysis, utilitarianism may emerge free of internal contradictions and inconsistencies. It may even appear to offer common-sense and fair solutions to many moral dilemmas. However, when we consider the implications further, and submit it to tests available through literature, a number of significant issues emerge. The example from Conrad raises the dilemma of competing duties in Kant's theory, and when applied to the Greatest Happiness Principle, it highlights the complexities in real-life moral decisions and, in turn, prompts us to question the adequacy of utilitarianism as a comprehensive moral theory.

General questions raised against utilitarianism can take several forms, and each can effectively be explored through literature. How can a moral agent effectively quantify suffering and happiness? On what objective scale are pleasure and pain measured? By what criteria do we evaluate the suffering of the few against the happiness of the many? To rate the pain, suffering and utter degradation of a few as acceptable for furthering the ease, comfort and pleasure even of the many involves an evaluative stance that cannot be reconciled with individual human interests. Moreover, what of questions of justice? Can a utilitarian reconcile such exploitation with the notion of autonomy? Further, in making an

evaluation in accord with the Greatest Happiness Principle, could a moral agent, confronted by the scene in Conrad's passage, truly exercise the detachment that Mill prescribes? Consistent with the attitudinal account of the connection between literature and philosophy, responses to this last question illuminate important aspects of an agent's commitment to the theory and, in so doing, reveal the feasibility of implementing its prescriptions. As impartiality is pivotal to utilitarian ethics, the way it accounts for dispositions such as sympathy is crucial to its function as a first order theory.

These problems may not definitively defeat a staunch utilitarian's claim that the theory offers the best all-round compromise in moral dilemmas, despite unfortunate negative implications. But reflecting on them may uncover complexities in moral decision-making that are unaccounted for in the hedonic calculus of utilitarianism, in which a particular action is right simply because it brings about a greater amount of utility, however construed, than its alternatives. Moreover, by revealing the potential human cost in making an otherwise clinical calculation of happiness over unhappiness (if, indeed, such a calculation is feasible), a literary example such as the scene from Conrad's novel can highlight the difficulties involved in maintaining the detachment required by Mill.

Two objections could be raised against the use of literary texts such as *Heart of Darkness* to illustrate and test moral perspectives. First, the 'legal' exploitation of indigenous workers is barely one step removed from slavery, a practice proscribed for many years by most civilised states, both legally and on moral grounds. Arguably, to apply this example to a contemporary moral argument is an anachronism. The reader of Conrad may therefore consider that, as the situation depicted is unacceptable in his or her own time, it is an anachronistic portrayal of moral seriousness and dismiss the passage as an invalid example by which to supplement, challenge, or test a moral perspective. Moreover, the same reader, because

⁴⁴ Mill, J. S., *On Liberty and Other Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 148

of the passage's racist overtones (the objectification and the ironic reference to the dying man's age could be misunderstood as representative of the narrator's own attitude to indigenous Africans), may view the extract as the embodiment of an unacceptable racist attitude. Therefore, as an illustration or test of a contemporary moral perspective, *Heart of Darkness* cannot reveal much about current utilitarian thought, let alone help moral philosophy to guide our own ethical practices. Second, as a literary depiction of suffering, the scene is graphic; few readers would doubt that the workers have been treated inhumanely. But even allowing for the reminder that valid rules of law can conflict with moral principles, the scene reveals nothing about the reasoning which led to these circumstances. It could be that this situation is just a product of the institutional greed which motivated the 'opening up' of Africa in the nineteenth century. It might be that the 'bags of bones' that confront Marlow are victims not of utilitarian reasoning, but of the exploitative practices employed to extract as much high-demand product as possible for as little financial cost as possible, to a marketplace ignorant or uncaring of the human cost of bringing it to market. Perhaps the strategy employed by traders for harvesting ivory in the Congo was purely instrumental, informed by economic and logistic rather than moral considerations; in which case we can infer no connection between the inhumanity observed by Marlow and utilitarianism's formula for right action. That the suffering is a result of some practice is indisputable; but that it embodies the consequences of adopting some ethical perspective or another is moot. How can we blame utilitarian decision making when distinctly *ethical* reasoning may have played no part in the decision making?

Both of these responses miss the point. In response to the first objection, it can be acknowledged that, since the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the United Nations, such exploitation as depicted in *Heart of Darkness* is indefensible in a modern global society which embraces respect for the dignity of persons. Like a society's body of laws, moral perspectives change

with time, evolving within particular cultures and more widely. As Cunningham writes, 'when we think of examples such as slavery, racism and patriarchy, we have little problem recognizing the potential for profound ethical change.'⁴⁵ But the fact that we now find certain historical practices morally repugnant does not preclude the investigation of questions concerning how a contemporary ethical theory stands in relation to those practices. Nor does it attenuate the power of an image to capture attention and induce us to look at suffering and its causes in new ways. Consider the following statement made in 1998 by Irwin Gordon, head of a US based lapel pin manufacturing company, in which he explains his firm's commercial success to *Business Week* magazine:

We have a factory in China where we have 250 people. We own them; it's our factory. We pay them \$40 a month and they work 28 days a month ... they work from 7 a.m. to 11 p. m. with two breaks for lunch and dinner ... they all eat together, 16 people to a room, stacked four bunks to a corner. Generally, they're young girls that come from the hills.⁴⁶

Entrepreneurs like Gordon would doubtless offer a persuasive justification of this situation, arguing that it is not the consequence of exploitation, but rather a product of the emergence of a previously closed economy into the free market and that his employees chose freely to live under these conditions. However, while not as graphic as Conrad's prose, the parallels between the scene described by Gordon and state of affairs represented in *Heart of Darkness*, published almost one hundred years earlier, are obvious. And they remind us that concern over a moral perspective's relation to the repugnant consequences of exploitative practices is not an anachronism.

To the second objection, it could be replied that in drawing examples from literature and applying them to a particular moral theory, we seek a more concrete context in which to explore the implications of committing to or consistently acting on its principles. For illustrative purposes, it suffices that there is a depiction of suffering, and that this suffering can be

⁴⁵ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 18

understood as the consequence of some practice. This representation, therefore, can be employed to flesh out the content of a moral concept: in this case, the notion that certain practices are morally significant by reference to their tendencies to produce human suffering.

There is no defect in the situation represented in *Heart of Darkness* being fictional. That the representation is plausible is sufficient, with plausible meant in the sense that Andrew Harrison means it: '... in the sense that it has to do with how we can make imaginative sense of what we are told.'⁴⁷ Malcolm Budd emphasises this point in *Values of Art*:

The fact of the matter is that we possess the capacity to entertain a thought without accepting it, the capacity to make believe, without believing, that some state of affairs obtains, and the capacity to imagine what we do not know to have happened.⁴⁸

A literary depiction's probative value derives from its plausibility as a representation of moral seriousness. The important question in the *Heart of Darkness* example is not about the causal relations between various fictional facts, which would involve determining the extent to which the workers' suffering is a consequence of adopting some ethical perspective. Rather, in testing a moral perspective with a literary example we ask whether certain situations could *plausibly* result from adopting that perspective, and what might follow from within that perspective about the moral value of the practices that resulted in such situations.

Utilitarianism and a Dostoyevskian Dilemma

The critic of utilitarianism can point to other examples from literature to clarify utilitarian responses to issues that require ethical reasoning, and to illuminate the implications of utilitarian decision making. One way to do this is to test how utilitarianism responds to a moral dilemma. In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a classic dilemma is presented in the ethical challenge Ivan Karamazov puts to his brother Alyosha:

⁴⁶ cited in Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, *Global Village or Global pillage*, 2nd edn., (Boston: South End Press, 1998), p. xviii

⁴⁷ Andrew Harrison, *Philosophy and the Arts*, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), p. 152

Tell me yourself directly, I challenge you – reply: imagine that you yourself are erecting the edifice of human fortune with the goal of, at the finale, making people happy, of at last giving them peace and quiet, but that in order to do it would be necessary and unavoidable to torture to death only one tiny little creature, that same little child that beats its breast with its little fist, and on its unavenged tears to found that edifice, would you agree to be the architect on those conditions, tell me and tell me truly.⁴⁹

Moore argues that 'it is always the duty of every agent to do that one, among all other actions which he *can* do on any given occasion, whose *total consequence* will have the greatest intrinsic value.'⁵⁰ According to utilitarian philosophers like J. C. C. Smart, intrinsic value consists in happiness, well-being or some other construal of utility. As he argues, 'the rational way to decide what to do is to decide to perform that one of those alternative actions open to us (including the null-action, the doing of nothing) which is likely to maximize the probable happiness or well-being of humanity as a whole, or more accurately, of all sentient beings.'⁵¹ In Ivan's challenge, the moral agent *can* do either one of only two alternative actions and, by reference to the principle that underlies Smart's account of utilitarianism, the total consequence of only one of these actions will maximise probable happiness or well-being for humanity as a whole and, thus, has the greatest intrinsic value. Because of this, the utilitarian is bound by the requirements of his theory to agree to be Ivan's architect; it is his or her unequivocal moral duty to torture the child to death.

The notion of a moral duty to torture to death an innocent child, or indeed any innocent person, clashes with our deep convictions about what matters to human life and character. However, when the stakes are as high as those in Ivan's challenge, perhaps the moral agent must ignore these deeply held moral beliefs and perform seemingly morally repugnant actions. Cunningham observes:

⁴⁸ Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 86

⁴⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. David McDuff, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p321

⁵⁰ G. E. Moore, *Ethics*, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), p. 232

We can imagine catastrophic circumstances in which we have neither the luxury nor the inclination to have commitments to ways of life and forms of character that are thought to really matter.⁵²

The circumstances envisioned by Cunningham are vividly exemplified in William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice*. In what Pojman describes as a 'classic moral dilemma in which both options are bad,'⁵³ Sophie, a Polish Catholic, is, along with her two small children, captured by the Nazis and transported to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. On her arrival she is confronted by a drunken Nazi doctor who attempts to seduce her. Her rejection enrages him and in an act of unmitigated evil he presents her with a choice unimaginable in all but extreme circumstances:

'So you believe in Christ the Redeemer?' the doctor said in a thick-tongued but oddly abstract way, like that of a lecturer examining the delicately shaded facet of a proposition in logic. Then he said something which for an instant was totally mystifying: 'Did he not say, "Suffer the little children to come unto me"?' He turned back to her, moving with the twitchy methodicalness of a drunk.

Sophie, with an inanity poised on her tongue and choked with emotion, was about to attempt a reply when the doctor said, 'You may keep one of your children.'

'Bitte?' said Sophie.

'You may keep one of your children,' he repeated. 'The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?'

'You mean I have to choose?'

'You're a Polack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege - a choice.'

Her thought processes dwindled, ceased. Then she felt her legs crumple. 'I can't choose! I can't choose!' She began to scream. Oh how she recalled her own screams! Tormented angels never screeched so loudly above hell's pandemonium. '*Ich kann nicht wählen!*' she screamed.

The doctor was aware of unwanted attention. 'Shut up!' he ordered. 'Hurry now and choose. Choose, goddamnit, or I'll send them both over there. Quick!'⁵⁴

⁵¹ J. J. C. Smart, 'An outline of a system of utilitarian ethics,' in Smart and Williams (1973), *op. cit.*, p. 42

⁵² Cunningham, *op. cit.* p. 16

⁵³ Louis Pojman, *The Moral Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 84

⁵⁴ Cited in Pojman, *ibid.*, p. 83

This is a monstrous dilemma devised by an inhuman architect of suffering, an architect authorised by an all-powerful regime which readily accommodates his cruelty. How would a moral theory cope with this dilemma? How would it deal with the Nazi doctor's sadistic ultimatum? In this predicament, Sophie has neither the luxury nor the inclination to practice her commitment to a way of life and form of character thought really to matter. Either Sophie makes an immediate choice concerning which of her two beloved children are to be sent to be killed, or else they both die. The death of one is the sole means of survival for the other. It is irresolvable in emotional terms; the consequence of either choice is evil. That she must choose is out of her control, but her choice is still autonomous. It is the preservation of autonomy (in this very narrow sphere) that makes the Nazi doctor's command so evil. Can a theoretical ethical perspective offer a definitive measure of right and wrong here? Is there a rational duty to choose one child over the other? The survival of which one of her two children will be most productive of general utility? Can Sophie's choice be analysed in terms of duty or utility? One imagines that for Sophie, strict adherence to moral principles concerning duty or general utility are never further from her mind than they are in the living moment of choice.

Cunningham argues that in anything short of the extreme circumstances presented in *Sophie's Choice*, we expect some vision of life, such as that expressed in an adequate moral theory, to command a measure of fidelity. This is the point that philosophers like Kekes and Morton make when they argue that ethical theories ought to give 'reasonable answers' to questions of moral significance and that, in answering these questions, their theories ought to clarify the deeper values that underlie the things we care about.⁵⁵ However, in revealing just what these deeper values are, the extent to which they inform our moral concerns, and how adequately an ethical theory accounts for them, it is sometimes useful to present cases at the limits of imagination. Ivan's challenge presents to our imagination

circumstances as catastrophic as Cunningham suggests, and for those with a deep conviction that torturing innocent children is an unmitigated evil, it presents an agonising dilemma. However, to the consistent act utilitarian Ivan's challenge poses no special difficulty. As Graham argues, in cases in which conflict occurs between general happiness and the rights of the innocent, the act utilitarian's commitment to the theory's particular way of deciding what is right would not be compromised by torturing the child:

If the balance of general good over individual loss has been properly described, then it is as clear as anything could be that we should sacrifice the innocent. From the point of view of act utilitarianism, these cases are in principle no different from any other calculation about good and bad consequences, and if the good outweighs the bad then there is nothing wrong with our action. We should sacrifice the innocent.⁵⁶

It is not suggested that the utilitarian would derive even the slightest pleasure from torturing to death an innocent child. However, consistency requires the utilitarian to regard the act of torture as *morally right*, that there is 'nothing wrong with it,' no matter how personally repugnant he or she finds it. A further implication worth noting from utilitarianism's response to Ivan's challenge is that if the utilitarian did feel pleasure in torturing the innocent child, then, insofar as the torturer's happiness would contribute to the *summum bonum*, this would *increase* the rightness of the act.

This ascription of moral correctness to repugnant actions leads Graham and others to reject utilitarianism on the grounds that the theory is inadequate both to the complexity of moral judgements and to the ethical implications of following them through. An evil act is an evil act, irrespective of how strong a pragmatic case may be made for it. This is the point that Mary Midgley makes in 'Duties Concerning Islands,' in which she argues, 'An ethical theory, which, when consistently followed through, has iniquitous consequences, is a bad theory and must be changed.'⁵⁷ She acknowledges that the extent to which these consequences are iniquitous

⁵⁵ See the previous chapter, notes 56 & 79

⁵⁶ Gordon Graham, 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 146

requires investigation, but she argues that an action's consequences cannot confer ethical validity just because they are logically consistent with the principles from which its performance was derived: 'We cannot directly conclude that the consequences cease to stink the moment they are seen to follow from our theory.'⁵⁸ The iniquitous consequences of utilitarianism's response to Ivan's challenge do not arise just from the performance of the act, but also from its approbation of the act as morally right solely by reference to the utility of its consequences.

To the difficulties for his theory raised in discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, a defender of utilitarianism might respond that while these criticisms may be justified by reference to the inhumane consequences of exploitation represented in Conrad's novel, they are effective only against one form of utilitarianism, act utilitarianism, and do not apply to all utilitarians. It might be argued that to ascribe to utilitarians in general Moore's view that the end of a morally significant action always justifies its means is a gross and unsympathetic misrepresentation of the arguments contained in the theory's foundational text: Mill's *Utilitarianism*.⁵⁹

On Urmson's account of Mill, a particular action can be justified as right by showing that it is in accord with some moral rule; and that it is wrong by showing that it transgresses some moral rule.⁶⁰ A moral rule, in turn, is justified by showing that the recognition of that rule promotes the ultimate end – in Mill's case, the *summum bonum* or the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Urmson acknowledges that rather than 'moral rule,' Mill more generally uses the terms 'secondary principle' or 'moral law,' but all three terms refer to a rule, law or principle derived from the overarching ethical precept of the Greatest Happiness Principle. Understood thus, imperatives such as 'Do no murder,' 'Tell no lies,' and

⁵⁷ Mary Midgley, 'Duties Concerning Islands' reprinted in Singer, P (Ed.), *Ethics*, (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 376.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ J. S. Mill (1991), *op. cit.*, pp. 131 - 205

'Keep promises' are moral rules whose correctness derives from the effects in the world of their espousal. Greatest happiness would hardly be served if murder, lying and promise-breaking were deemed acceptable as common practices.

There is an important distinction between Kantian ethics and rule utilitarianism. Kant argues that the second principle of morality is that 'an action from duty has its moral worth *not in the purpose* to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon' (AK 4: 399). For Kant, a moral rule is a universal and necessary *a priori* principle, and its obedience is to be regarded as an end in itself:

Now, all imperatives command either *hypothetically* or *categorically*. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that it is at least possible for one to will). The categorical imperative would be one which represented an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end.

[...] if the action would be good merely as a means *to something else*, the imperative is *hypothetical*; if the action is represented as *in itself* good, hence as necessary in a will in itself conforming to reason, as its principle, *then it is categorical*. (AK 4: 414)

For the rule utilitarian, and utilitarians in general, *all* sound imperatives command hypothetically. Obedience to a moral rule is a means to something else: the greatest happiness. Moral rules are thus inferred, *a posteriori*, from their tendency to effect total happiness in the world, and a rule's validity is contingent on the extent to which its practice promotes the greatest happiness.

In the case from *Heart of Darkness*, in replying to the objection that utilitarianism allows such exploitation on the grounds that the consequent happiness of a great many people outweighs the misery of a few, the defender of rule utilitarianism can deny that practices which in general result in negative consequences such as promise-breaking, murder, telling lies and the kind of inhumane treatment represented in *Heart of Darkness*

⁶⁰ J. O. Urmson, 'The Interpretation of the Moral philosophy of J. S. Mill,' in *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 3 (1953), pp. 33-39.

are in accord with moral rules that promote general happiness. Thus it could be argued that the unpropitious circumstances of the indigenous workers in Conrad's novel are *precisely* the consequences by reference to which rule utilitarianism would evaluate a general practice as morally wrong. And this would be so whether or not it could be shown that, in this particular situation, refraining from these exploitative practices does less 'good'. As Mabbott explains:

... on Urmson's view it may be right to do an action which is in accord with a moral rule, even if that particular action does less good than some alternative action – on the ground that the general practice of the rule does more good than the omission of such practice or the practice of an alternative rule.⁶¹

Here rule utilitarianism seems to overcome the objection that consistently acting on its normative conclusions may require the violation of the deep moral convictions that proscribe murder, lying, promise-breaking and the inhumane treatment of innocent persons. In relation to the situation represented in *Heart of Darkness*, rule utilitarianism seems successfully to forestall the non-utilitarian's rejection of act utilitarianism on the grounds that commitment to its precepts may result in such an iniquitous consequence as the moral approbation of egregious acts.

But how would the rule utilitarian respond to Ivan's challenge? Ivan's challenge raises a different moral issue from that which arises from the scene in Conrad's novel. So long as it can be shown that a certain form of exploitation produces the kinds of negative consequences suffered by the indigenous workers in *Heart of Darkness*, we can see how a rule proscribing its practice could be inferred from its tendency to affect the greatest good. This is basic inductive reasoning at work. However, insofar as it is unique, and entirely situational in character, Ivan's challenge precludes an inductive appeal to the tendencies of certain practices to produce certain consequences.

⁶¹ J. D. Mabbott, 'Interpretations of Mill's Utilitarianism' in *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 6 (1956), p. 115

Could the rule utilitarian remain faithful to the theory and at the same time refuse to torture the child? For a moral judgement to qualify as distinctly utilitarian two conditions must be met: first, the judgement must be made according to the actual or anticipated consequences of an action; and second, those consequences must be expressed in relation to some ultimate end. As we saw earlier, Ivan's challenge presents no special difficulties for the act utilitarian: as a consequence of torturing the child, the ultimate end, expressed in terms of the greatest good, will be promoted; hence both conditions obtain.

However, the scenario in Dostoyevsky's novel poses a serious internal challenge to rule utilitarianism in that it engenders a conflict between two logically distinct yet equally necessary features of the theory: the obedience to moral rules and the promotion of the greatest good. To torture the child would be to transgress a moral rule 'Do not torture innocent children.' Yet *not* to transgress this rule would bring about the worst possible state of affairs for the greatest number of people. Unlike the act utilitarian, Ivan's challenge clearly presents a dilemma to the rule utilitarian; but it also poses a dilemma to the logical structure of the theory itself, the resolution of which requires either a serious compromise or renunciation in the rule utilitarian: either transgress a moral rule the recognition of which in general brings about the greatest happiness, or else obey the rule and, in so doing, forgo the greatest happiness. Arguably, Ivan's challenge shows that even rule utilitarianism is ultimately untenable.

The respondent to the difficulties posed by Ivan's challenge may object to this way of testing a moral theory on two grounds. First, this kind of dilemma is too unrealistic or implausible to be of serious value and, as such, reveals nothing of significance about the real implications of rule utilitarianism. It might be argued that dilemmas in real life constitute less difficult moral choices the resolution of which involves less sinister compromises between the interests or preferences of the many over the few. Ivan's challenge, on the other, hand presents an either/or situation of

such extremes that it will not admit of resolution. Second, there could exist alternatives beyond the two choices offered by Ivan. It might be suggested that an appeal for clemency might extract a compromise from whichever entity has the power to appoint Ivan's architect. Or he or she might insist that, like Socrates staying home rather than participate in the morally dubious action of arresting Leon,⁶² the protagonist could void the process and simply refuse to participate in any action that might lead to any moral consequences whatsoever.

The rule utilitarian's first objection misses the point entirely. While the desire for 'realism' or 'plausibility' may in some cases be warranted, we can nevertheless make imaginative sense of Ivan's challenge and see that, while extreme, it represents a moral dilemma in the most useful sense of the term and, as shown in the example of Sophie's choice, one which is entirely plausible from an historical perspective. Monstrous consequences of choosing between either course offered in a dilemma are not always beyond the bounds of reality. Moreover, the use of dilemma to test a moral perspective is not new to philosophy. For example, in Plato's *Republic* we see Socrates employing a dilemma to test the implications of Cephalus' conception of right action which he defines as 'truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed':

'For instance [asks Socrates], if one borrowed a weapon from a friend who subsequently went out of his mind and then asked for it back, surely it would be generally agreed that one ought not to return it, and that it would not be right to do so, not to consent to tell the strict truth to a madman?'

'That is true,' he replied.

'Well then,' I said, 'telling the truth and returning what we have borrowed is not the definition of doing right.'⁶³

As Graham writes, 'What is of interest ... is not how dilemmas like these are to be resolved, but how they are to be analysed.'⁶⁴ The object of raising Ivan's challenge as a hypothetical case in the context of utilitarian ethics is

⁶² Plato, *The Apology*, 32d, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 56

⁶³ Plato, *The Republic*, 331e,d, *op. cit.*, p. 8

⁶⁴ Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 146

not to resolve the dilemma it poses, but to analyse it in terms of that particular ethical perspective and, in so doing, use it to reveal and clarify the implications for that theory and, like Socrates questioning Cephalus, to test its responses to these implications and to see whether their consequences are acceptable. Jonathon Glover defends the use of hypothetical cases against the objection that they are artificial and hence lack probative value by claiming that they have been 'fruitful in other fields' including scientific experiment, in which the influences of factors not being studied are, as far as possible, artificially eliminated.⁶⁵ He argues, 'A defence of the experimental method has its parallel in the case for arguing about ethics by means of asking for responses to deliberately simplified imaginary situations.'⁶⁶ Irrespective of the plausibility of its sinister extremes, the value of Ivan's challenge lies in how an ethical theory's response to it may be understood and what implications follow from this response. Which of the two alternatives given to Alyosha would rule utilitarianism require him to take? How would this decision be justified, and what are the implications for the theory of making such a choice?

The rule utilitarian's other argument seeks to show that there is no real dilemma in Ivan's challenge; not because, like the act utilitarian, he or she does not recognise moral dilemmas of this nature, nor because the extremes it entails are too sinister or outlandish to be plausible, but because we can always imagine alternatives to those given in the text. This objection resembles an argument alleging the fallacy of false dichotomy: the challenge is fallacious because there are hidden alternative course of action to those offered. However, if we use the text as a heuristic device to reveal, clarify and reflect on the implications of a moral theory, and if we take these reflections seriously, then we are bound by its content. As Michael Butor writes, 'the novel tends naturally towards its own elucidation.'⁶⁷ In the world of *The Brothers Karamazov*, there are only two alternative courses

⁶⁵ Jonathon Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 34

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Michael Butor, 'The Novel as Research' in Malcom Bradbury, ed., *The Novel Today* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), p. 52

of action open to Alyosha, only two horns of the dilemma, neither of which admits of amendment from outside its domain: either torture the child to death and bring happiness and contentment to the world, or else relieve the child and leave the world in misery. These are the only two choices. The objector cannot refuse to act because that constitutes a reprieve for the child and serves only to forfeit the opportunity for greatest happiness. Moreover, there can be no *ad hoc* addition of further alternatives for the purposes of resolving the dilemma in favour of one theory or another. To do so would be to enter into an open-ended dialectic in which an unlimited number of new hypothetical conditions emerge: *But what if? But then what if? Yes, but then what if?* And to allow this would without warrant empty the concept of a moral dilemma of any substantive content, and rob Ivan's challenge of any probative value. As there are no possibilities for action other than those described in the text, the either/or situation represented in Ivan's challenge is not misused and Alyosha's dilemma is genuine. Ivan's challenge does not involve a false dichotomy and the objection fails.

Nor does Urmson's account of Mill offer any substantive resolution. Urmson argues that for a moral rule to be correct it must be shown that its implementation promotes the ultimate end, i.e. greatest happiness. But in Ivan's challenge, the greatest happiness can only be served by torturing the child to death. And as already shown, no general rule can be inferred from the particular circumstances represented in Ivan's challenge (that is, torturing the innocent *in general* does not tend to increase total happiness). If a rule is invoked here, and for the rule utilitarian consistency requires this, that rule must entail that it is wrong to torture innocent children except when doing so serves to promote greatest happiness.

Thus, in specific cases such as Ivan's challenge, a moral rule's force becomes contingent on the extent to which, in *particular* situations, its practice brings about the greatest happiness to the greatest number. Considered in this light, the overriding precept of rule utilitarianism becomes: obey moral rules *except* where obedience does not promote the

greatest happiness. In which case, a particular action is justified as right *not* because it accords with some moral rule, but because it is consistent with the fundamental maxim which informs all utilitarian calculations and enjoins the moral agent to act so as to maximise probable utility. Indeed, Smart argues in his defence of act utilitarianism, ‘...an adequate rule-utilitarianism would not only be extensionally equivalent to the act utilitarian principle (i.e. would enjoin the same set of actions as it) but would in fact consist of one rule only, the act utilitarian one: “maximize probable benefit”.’⁶⁸ Therefore, to remain faithful to the theory, the rule utilitarian must either alter whichever moral rule concerns the torture of innocent children to accommodate the situation and allow the specific act in favour of maximum probable benefit, in which case rule utilitarianism collapses into act utilitarianism, or else abandon utilitarianism altogether.

Instructive Reminders

In addition to illustrating, challenging and testing a moral perspective, literature can fulfil another valuable function in ethical reflection: that of providing reminders of facts or issues that pertain to an ethical perspective. Phillips argues that much of literature’s value to ethical reflection lies in its capacity to reveal the ways in which an ethical perspective, such as Kantian Ethics or Utilitarianism, ‘...may change, be eroded, be found wanting, or become impossible for people.’⁶⁹ He suggests:

This can be brought out powerfully ... by using literature as a source of reminders (not examples) from which philosophy can benefit in wrestling with the issues concerning the firm or slackening hold on various perspectives in human life.⁷⁰

Using literature to *remind* us of these issues concerning an ethical perspective echoes Wittgenstein’s idea of the central role that reminders play in philosophical reflection. In *Philosophical Investigations* he writes, ‘The

⁶⁸ Smart, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 1

work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.⁷¹

While McTaggart claims that philosophers are ‘...concerned at almost every step with proving or disproving something,’⁷² the counterargument put by Phillips and Wittgenstein is that many philosophers engage in a broader range of philosophical tasks. As Passmore writes, ‘the philosopher spends a great deal of his time in describing, or classifying, or defining, or analysing, or disproving.’⁷³ He contends that the philosopher ‘is trying to solve certain problems, and in the attempt to solve problems, proof plays only a limited part.’⁷⁴ He agrees that some philosophers seek to construct arguments that resemble mathematical or experimental proofs, but maintains that most arguments take the form of neither. Indeed, many consist in *reminders* of some fact that bears on their investigations. Passmore argues that reminders play an important part in philosophy, and that the act of reminding is a legitimate, effective and ‘appropriately modest sort of thing to do.’⁷⁵ Nor do these reminders always concern matters of deep philosophic import. Some arguments, he suggests, ‘simply remind us of a familiar fact of everyday life’⁷⁶ that may have been overlooked or received too little attention. He cites the example of the person who may have had imposed upon him too heavy a workload and offers the reminder that ‘I can’t do everything; I’ve only got two legs.’ Passmore argues that while the premise and conclusion of this argument ‘are not the sort with which scientists and mathematicians concern themselves,’ the reminder nonetheless does constitute an argument.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, §127, p. 43

⁷² J. M. E. McTaggart, cited in John Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (London: Duckworth, 1961), p. 7

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 10

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 8

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

Passmore argues that philosophers traditionally 'assert very wide generalizations referring to a great range of facts.'⁷⁸ An example of such a generalisation might be Mill's assertion that for all persons happiness is the only thing desirable as an end, and that all other things are valuable only as a means to that end. For Mill, the Greatest Happiness Principle thus constitutes the soundest basis for all moral reasoning, and this position is embraced enthusiastically by his utilitarian successors. Passmore argues 'a natural way of dealing with the enthusiasm of philosophers is to pull them up with a reminder.'⁷⁹ A philosopher who enthusiastically adopts Mill's view on the supreme value of happiness, for instance, might be reminded that whilst desirable, happiness is not necessarily the only thing valuable as an end and that it is questionable whether all other things are valuable solely by reference to their being means to that end. The objector to Mill's position must then choose the method to furnish this reminder and, as Passmore writes (citing Popper), 'philosophers are as free as others to use any method in searching for the truth.'⁸⁰ Nor are reminders new to the methods of philosophical reflection. Renford Bambrough argues for the soundness of Plato's link between dialectic and *Anamnesis* – the reminding of what we might already know but which may have become lost in the broader issues of our reflections. As he argues, 'reminders are usually of minute particulars, of forgotten instances to which some hasty generality is vulnerable.'⁸¹ A central claim in the propositional account of the role for literature in philosophical reflection is that, in considering the available methods and evidence by which the philosopher may support an argument for an ethical truth, literature can be a rich source of these reminders.

For example, one could point to the plight of the workers in *Heart of Darkness* as a reminder of the intrinsic value of human dignity, arguing that the degradation is clearly a consequence of using the workers merely as

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 8-9

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 8

⁸¹ Renford Bambrough, 'Literature and Philosophy,' in *Wisdom: Twelve Essays*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), p. 278

means to the happiness of others. If we sympathise with the workers, we do so not just because they appear to be unhappy, or merely because their plight fails to promote some utility, or because their preferences for an alternative situation are not satisfied; we sympathise with them because their dignity has been compromised by the imposition of egregious working conditions. Dignity, then, has value beyond its instrumental relation to happiness, utility, or the satisfaction of preferences. Further, to those who argue that, because it is a consequence of their being engaged legally, the workers' suffering is morally insignificant, the scene is a graphic reminder of Hart's point that ethics and the law sometimes conflict, and that 'legal' does not always entail 'ethical.' Besides lending support to the Kantian perspective, the passages from *Heart of Darkness* also present it with a challenge: Marlow's interaction with the dying worker reminds us that there is more to moral life than the apprehension of duty; and that certain dispositions, such as sympathy, compassion and beneficence, are traits whose moral value requires a more adequate account than that furnished by the Kantian perspective. Indeed, as shown, Huck's turmoil in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reminds us of the centrality of sympathy's role in humane ethical decision making.

Doubtless a pragmatic argument justifying the plight of the refugee mother and child in Achebe's poem might be made in terms of 'sustainable losses,' 'collateral damage,' or 'the unavoidable consequences of a necessary and just war.' The poetic depiction of tragic dignity, however, coupled with the vivid imagery of suffering, reminds us that no purely rational argument for a just war can adequately accommodate the human cost of armed conflict. Nor can it be supported from the victims' perspective. In considering how agents apprehend the moral significance of the truism 'war is hell,' Cunningham writes:

We try to extrapolate from our own experience and exercise our imagination as best we can, but surely this is not the same thing as actually being there. And short of firsthand experience, the best way to appreciate the horrors of war certainly is not through any abstract philosophical description or analysis. Any such

description or analysis is destined to ring hollow because it fails to capture the nature and significance of war.⁸²

Cunningham argues that a narrative, such as that represented in a film like *Saving Private Ryan*, graphically depicts the horrors of war and leads to an appreciation of its moral significance 'far better ... than any traditional philosophical analysis could possibly hope to provide.'⁸³ He does not claim that such depictions of the horror of real war, or of the complex reality of concrete moral situations, can in any way *replace* systematic ethical reflection; rather, he argues that philosophy cannot fruitfully operate completely independent from the 'raw data of human experience,' even if this experience be vicarious. Indeed, his stance is that philosophical reflection 'must be brought to our experiences and observations of the world so as to order and ultimately command them in one way or another.'⁸⁴ In terms of literary imagery, Achebe's poem is equally graphic and constitutes a valuable reminder of war's horror and its effects on the innocent. As Cunningham argues, 'Just-war theory and the like cannot hope to affect our deliberation and appreciation in quite the same way, and without insights of this sort, we deliberate and decide about war at our own moral peril.'⁸⁵ Thus the reminder contained in this poem may prompt us to review how an ethical perspective deals with war; and consequently induce proponents of just-war arguments to rethink whether and how their positions can be justified on purely rational grounds.

Finally, the testing of act utilitarianism with Ivan's challenge reminds us of the potential iniquitous consequences of rigid adherence to a particular ethical perspective and reveals the ways in which it may be found wanting. It reminds us that our most deeply held moral convictions may conflict with the demands of an ethical theory, and thus raises serious questions concerning the viability of that theory. The same test applied to rule utilitarianism reminds us that, despite its sober appeal to general rules,

⁸² Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 72

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 73

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

there are cases in which it may be impossible to consistently act on the principles of the theory, and thus lends support to the position that general rules and formulations are often inadequate to the complexity of particular situations.

The Exemplification and Range of Moral Concepts

Reminders are thus important and literature can be a rich source of these. Further, Phillips' parenthetical rejection of the value of literature as source of *examples* is mistaken. The case against Phillips is that many moral concepts are ostensibly definable; that is, they are exemplifiable by showing instances of the correct application of the concept. In the absence of actual instantiations of moral concepts, we can look to representations of paradigm cases of the concepts as clear examples of their instantiation. An important aspect of literature's contribution to ethical reflection is its ability to furnish an almost unlimited number of fictional instantiations of ethical concepts which can clarify and enrich an ethical perspective's content.

Ostensive definition can aid philosophical analysis. Exemplification can help us to clarify ethical concepts by highlighting instantiations of the concept we seek to understand. For example, if a Kantian were asked 'What do you mean by "using persons as mere means to an end" and how is the cost explained in terms of the loss of human dignity?' he or she could cite the scene from *Heart of Darkness*, which not only reminds us that exploitation compromises human dignity, but is itself a *clear example* of the degrading effect exploitation has on human dignity. Similarly, Ivan's challenge not only reminds us of the cost of rigid adherence to an ethical perspective, it is itself a clear example of an ethical dilemma. To the question: 'What do you mean by "ethical dilemma"?' one can point to the difficult choice between alternative actions offered to the would-be torturer, exhibiting his quandary as an ethical dilemma: a situation in which he must choose between two ethically repugnant acts. The significance of *Sophie's Choice* in this regard is obvious. Similarly, Dedalus' turmoil in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* exemplifies a certain kind of moral anguish, such as

may be experienced when choosing between fidelity to one's principles and submitting to other, less rational drives. Achebe's poem *Refugee Mother and Child* not only reminds us of the human cost of war, it is itself a clear example of the suffering, degradation and personal cost of war. Thus, a number of moral concepts are exemplified in these literary works, including: dignity, exploitation, dilemma, suffering, fidelity, and the human cost of war.

An objection here is that these are not ostensive definitions of moral concepts, but mere examples of morally significant events. According to this argument, the moral value of these events is derived via judgements that are analysable in terms of either one of only two fundamental moral concepts: *duty*, as derived from the categorical imperative; or *good state of affairs*, as derived from the Greatest Happiness Principle. This argument presupposes that all that is important morally can be reduced to one of these two concepts, each of which is informed by either of two dominant ethical perspectives. By extension, the argument that moral judgements are only analysable in terms of a formal principle also entails that the proper definitions of 'good' or 'evil' (this list could be extended to include 'right' or 'wrong,' 'ethical' or 'unethical') can only be established by reference to these principles.

In the *Heart of Darkness* example, for the Kantian, the moral significance of the workers' plight lies not in their suffering, but in the fact that an act contrary to a duty prescribed in the second formulation of the categorical imperative has been performed. On this account, the moral significance of all events is reducible to the most basic and only relevant concept: moral duty defined by the categorical imperative, our duty not to use people merely as means to our ends. An action is *right* only if it is performed according to duty, *wrong* if it contravenes duty. All other considerations are subordinate, and subsumed under the categorical imperative. As such, they are only derivatively moral, not moral in their own right. As shown earlier, this is why Marlow's engagement with the dying worker is seen by Kantians as ethically insignificant.

For the utilitarian, on the other hand, moral significance lies in how the workers' plight relates to the Greatest Happiness Principle and its cognate precepts. That is, the moral significance of their situation is evaluated by reference to the extent to which their suffering reduces overall utility and whether it is compensated for by a corresponding increase in overall utility. Individualised considerations such as personal suffering and the extent to which a person's dignity has been compromised are subsumed under the concern for general happiness or utility. Thus, for the utilitarian, moral significance is reducible to the most basic and only relevant moral concept: utility. An action is *right* if it increases overall utility, *wrong* if it produces the reverse. Again, Marlow's beneficence is only a derivatively moral consideration; and is given ethical value only by reference to the extent to which it increases general utility.

To philosophers like Williams, however, this quest for simplicity in moral judgements is 'wrongheaded'⁸⁶ and that 'in ethics the reductive enterprise has no justification and should disappear.'⁸⁷ He puts the question:

If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics – the truth, we might say, about the ethical – why is there any expectation that it should be so simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one of two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs* rather than many?⁸⁸

Williams argues that we employ a greater variety of different ethical considerations than can be accounted for in the reduction of ethics to only one of two basic concepts. He maintains, 'perhaps we need as many concepts to describe [the ethical] as we need, and no fewer.'⁸⁹ Cunningham echoes Williams' concern that the reductive approach of traditional philosophical reflection produces only an impoverished ethical vocabulary, arguing that a richer vocabulary is required if philosophical ethics is to effectively reach its ultimate target: 'insight about ethical concerns which

⁸⁶ Williams (1985), p. 17

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

can and should operate as a genuine force in life and character.'⁹⁰ He accepts:

Concepts such as 'right,' 'wrong,' 'good,' and 'bad' may be important elements of our ethical lexicon because they provide a ready vocabulary for expressing general, all-things-considered judgements about actions, ways of life, and forms of character.⁹¹

While accepting that the conceptual simplicity of some ethical judgements is important, he argues that in everyday life – such as may be represented in literary depictions of life and character – we can 'learn and express more by way of the vast number of ethical concepts we use to articulate descriptions about human life and character.'⁹² He argues that humans can be good or bad, or do right or wrong in many ways, none of which need share any common core, and not all of which can be reduced to questions of duty or greatest happiness. Cunningham lists a number of questions which, he maintains, we are entitled to expect a conception of the ethical to address, and which the conceptual simplicity of traditional ethics cannot accommodate:

What do I owe others, what do they owe me? When do the needs of others limit my pursuit of my own needs? How do the needs of strangers stack up against loved ones? What would a just life look like? What character traits should I inculcate? Are all ethical concerns compatible? How am I to choose between competing ethical loves?⁹³

He writes, 'not only do we expect any conception of ethics to address such questions, but we do not start with a blank slate with respect to the answers.'⁹⁴ That is, we have pre-theoretical notions of what ethics consists in, and we have a ready-made vocabulary to describe its constituents. An adequate moral philosophy must consider whether and how these constituents have a hold on us, and the extent to which they ought to act as forces in our lives. This is what Morton means when he argues that, in

⁹⁰ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 18

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 17

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

helping us to find our way through the moral problems that really trouble us, an adequate moral philosophy must identify and connect our intensely felt moral concerns and help us to 'see the deeper values that underlie the things we care about.'⁹⁵ In order to address these concerns, Williams argues that we require an ethics that consists in more substantive, or 'thicker' ethical notions that not only express a union of fact and value, but also entail some general connection to action, and can thus be employed to enrich a perspective's prescriptive content for the ethical life.⁹⁶ In contrasting thick moral concepts with thinner concepts such as 'good,' 'bad,' 'right,' 'wrong,' 'duty' and 'state of affairs,' Williams cites examples such as 'coward, lie, brutality, gratitude, and so forth.'⁹⁷ Cunningham enumerates a more comprehensive list of thick concepts from everyday life which, he suggests, an adequate account of ethics must accommodate as factors in the life of a moral agent:

shame, pride, respect, mercy, forgiveness, honor, cruelty, envy, compassion, dignity, justice, jealousy, lust, servility, pity, modesty, benevolence, honesty, autonomy, integrity, loyalty, greed, malevolence, guilt, authenticity, self-respect, self-deception, generosity, magnanimity, spite, arrogance, courage, revenge, sympathy, humiliation, oppression, conceit, selfishness, despair, intolerance, narcissism, hate, redemption, trust, hope, grace, love.⁹⁸

He argues that reflection on these concepts better accommodates the complexity of moral judgements than the reductive enterprise of traditional ethics, characterised by the dichotomy between judgements concerning duty and those which ascribe moral value solely to consequences. We care about Marlow's interaction with the workers not just because of how it relates to the categorical imperative, but because we value compassion, generosity and beneficence, and consider them traits worth cultivating in their own right. We sympathise with the workers and ascribe moral value to their plight not just because we apprehend duties to act in certain ways,

⁹⁵ Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 120

⁹⁶ Williams (1985), *op. cit.*, pp. 129ff

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 140

⁹⁸ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 17

nor because we are concerned merely to calculate the effect of their situation on overall happiness, but because we regard suffering, servility, and indignity as moral evils in their own right. So too, we regard the corporate greed and oppressive conduct which led to this situation as distinct moral evils. Similarly, we understand and respond to the despair of Achebe's refugee mother; and we can at least comprehend, if not empathise with, Dedalus' anguish, whether or not we've experienced the same and despite how we may judge his thoughts and acts. Williams and Cunningham agree that how ethical theories may account for thick moral concepts varies greatly, as will the extent to which they act as forces in an agent's life. But because they are forces that shape attachments constitutive of who we are, their normative value is not to be underrated. According to Williams, thick concepts:

... are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action, though that reason may be outweighed by other reasons... Of course, exactly what reason for action is provided, and for whom, depends on the situation in ways that may well be governed by this and by other ethical concepts, but some general connection with action is clear enough.⁹⁹

If Williams is correct, then the fictional instantiations of those moral concepts discussed earlier may furnish reasons to act in particular ways in real life, given sufficient similarities between actual situations and those depicted in the literary passages. Accordingly, Williams and Cunningham argue that these moral concepts deserve serious attention, and that, as Cunningham observes, in accommodating a greater range of ethical concerns, 'a bigger, richer ethical vocabulary can only serve the interests of philosophical reflection.'¹⁰⁰

The propositional account holds that literature can play a valuable role in ethical reflection by furnishing a virtually inexhaustible supply of instantiations of thick ethical concepts. The attitudinal account holds that literature can help to reveal the extent to which these concepts can act as

⁹⁹ Williams (1985), *loc. cit.*

forces in our lives. This application for literature is particularly valuable in examining and elucidating the prescriptions of virtue-based ethical systems. These theories seek to identify the most desirable ways of life and forms of character. In so doing, normative virtue theories prescribes those traits and dispositions which are most worth cultivating, and those vices which are most worth suppressing, and which are not adequately comprehended in perspectives which limit ethical considerations to those of bare duty or utilitarian consequence. As a response to the reductive enterprise of traditional ethics, Annas argues that recent attention to the virtues:

has seemed to many to be a useful corrective to modern theories which operate with a narrow and abstract notion of what is relevant to morality, and which are frequently criticized for producing theories which are seriously at odds with our conceptions of what matters in our lives.¹⁰¹

As Rachels defines it, a virtue is 'a trait of character, manifested in habitual action, that is good for a person to have.'¹⁰² Literature can flesh out the substantive content of a virtue ethics perspective by providing examples of the distinctive features of the virtues – desirable character traits – such as honesty, courage, generosity, and compassion. These instantiations can exemplify the principles on which the virtues are founded and, as such, fortify arguments that seek to justify their value.

Literary depictions of virtuous characters abound, but Louis Pojman considers that one of 'the most poignant examples of virtue' can be found in the character of the bishop of Digne in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.¹⁰³ In Hugo's novel, the bishop's saintly character is exemplified in his response to learning that the main protagonist, Jean Valjean, has been arrested for stealing the bishop's silverware. It is a cold evening and Valjean, a recently freed and homeless convict, is turned away from the doors of many village houses when at last a woman takes pity on him and directs him to a house

¹⁰⁰ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 19

¹⁰¹ Julia Annas, *op. cit.*, p. 4

¹⁰² Rachels, *op. cit.*, p. 163

¹⁰³ Louis Pojman (2000), *op. cit.* pp. 370-388

of possible refuge for the night. Valjean does not know that this is the house of the Bishop of Digne, a man committed to service to the poor. To Valjean's surprise, the bishop admits him, feeds him and allows him to stay at no charge. He is unaccustomed to such hospitality; his identification as an ex-convict generally causes others to shun him. This is his first night in a real bed after nineteen years imprisonment and he sleeps only a few hours. He awakes long before dawn and, after an hour of indecision, struggling with his inclinations, he finally decides to make off with the silverware he spied earlier, reasoning that it will fetch more money in one sale than he had been able to save in the previous nineteen years of false imprisonment. He steals the silverware, but before he travels far he is arrested by the gendarmerie and taken back to the Bishop's house:

The door opened. A strange fierce group appeared on the threshold. Three men were holding a fourth by the collar. The three men were gendarmes; the fourth was Jean Valjean.

...

"Ah, there you are!" said he [the bishop], looking at Jean Valjean, "I am glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks also, which are silver like the rest, and would bring 200 francs. Why did you not take them along with your plates?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression no human tongue could describe.

"Monseigneur," said the brigadier, "then what this man said was true? We met him. He was going like a man who was running away and we arrested him in order to see. He had this silver."

"And he told you," interrupted the bishop, with a smile, "that it had been given him by a good old priest with whom he had passed the night. I see it all. And you brought him back here? It is all a mistake."

"If that is so," said the brigadier, "we can let him go."

"Certainly," replied the bishop.

The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who shrank back.

"Is it true that they let me go?" he said in a voice almost inarticulate, as if he were speaking in his sleep.

...

"My friend," said the bishop, "before you go away here are your candlesticks; take them."

...

Jean Valjean was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically and with a wild appearance.

...
The bishop approached him and said, in a low voice:
"Forget not, never forget that you have promised to use this silver
to become an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of this promise stood
confounded. The bishop had laid much stress on these words as
he had uttered them.¹⁰⁴

The bishop's generosity of spirit is not wasted on the ex-convict; Valjean ultimately becomes a moral hero who renounces his criminal tendencies and, in emulating the bishop's character, devotes his life to serving the underprivileged. As a novel, *Les Misérables* contains all of the elements typical of narrative art that enable the reader to discern moral significance in characters, actions and situations. Moreover, as Cunningham argues, in its provision of 'detailed depictions of the complex inner life of fictional characters embroiled in the messy business of living,' literature furnishes an ideal corrective to the simplicity of traditional ethics and 'directs our attention to the subtleties and nuances of what should rightly command our attention.'¹⁰⁵ In its portrayal of the bishop as someone who acts out of spontaneous goodness than in conscious and reflective accordance with moral duty, and is prepared to forsake material property and, in so doing endanger his own liberty, rather than condemn a man to a life of penal servitude, this passage is a particularly effective exemplification of a virtuous character. It shows that some morally approbatory actions are not reducible solely to either duty or utility, and that value attaches not only to the agent's virtue, but also, as evidenced in Jean Valjean's subsequent transformation, to the effect on the recipient of such kindness. Thus what is of ethical interest in *Les Misérables* is not just the illustration of the bishop's saintly character (which could be recounted in a fable, parable or short sketch), but is in the way that the story plays out in the development of Valjean's ethical character. While this episode contains a valuable representation virtuous action, a key aspect of the novel's plot is that it organises the causal and valuational relations between the bishop's

¹⁰⁴ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (1863), reprinted in Pojman, *ibid.*, p. 387

engagement with Valjean, and Valjean's subsequent development as a virtuous agent.

One important question remains: of all the means by which reflection can enrich the content of ethics and articulate a clear vision of the best ways of life and forms of character, why choose imaginative literature? Cannot these illustrations, tests, reminders, definitions and concepts be gleaned from lived experience? Or from imaginative thought experiments? Can other forms of literature, such a biography or history, be equally rewarding here?

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4

THE SCOPE OF FICTION AND THE ASCENDANCY OF THE NOVEL

One obvious answer [to the question Why consult literature?] was already suggested by Aristotle: we have never lived enough.

*Martha Nussbaum*¹

The Holiness of Minute Particulars.

*William Blake*²

Something is always lost in generalisation. A railway leaves out all the gaps of dirt between. Generalisations are only a means of getting about.

*T. E. Hulme*³

The Utility of Fact and the Utility of Fiction

As noted previously, writers of imaginative literature are not bound by the same formal constraints that confine traditional philosophical discourse. The scope of this freedom emerges in Beardsmore's contention that the author of creative fiction is 'likely to furnish us with a wider range of problems, situations, possibilities with which to illustrate and test our philosophical theories'⁴ than those which can be portrayed in traditional philosophical argument alone. An analogous freedom exists for the reader of imaginative literature. As argued earlier, traditional philosophical argument fails adequately to accommodate the complexities of real-life

¹ Nussbaum (1990), *op. cit.*, p. 47

² William Blake, *Jerusalem*

³ T. E. Hulme, *Speculations*, p. 230; cited in Renford Bambrough, *op. cit.*, p. 276

⁴ Beardsmore, *op. cit.*, p. 62

ethical judgements and, hence, also fails to address crucial aspects of the agent's own moral understanding. With imaginative literature, on the other hand, readers are free of the rational constraints imposed by abstract ethical argument. Characters in fiction may act inconsistently, and their actions may merely follow chronologically rather than reasonably. The writer of fiction is not compelled to create characters whose actions reflect rational norms. These are not failings in literature, but rather are features of its ability to represent what Nussbaum regards as the world's complexity, mysteriousness and 'flawed and imperfect beauty'⁵ Moreover, readers of imaginative literature are free of the practical constraints that limit their ability to experience a sufficiently wide range of ethical situations required to adequately assess the implications of consistently acting on the precepts of an ethical theory. However, to be of value, how closely must a work of imaginative literature resemble the world it represents?

In *Freedom and Reason*, Hare only tentatively agrees that imaginative literature offers these practical advantages to moral reflection when, he says, literature is employed '...as an adjunct to moral thought.'⁶ While he accepts that the sympathetic imagination plays an important role in moral reflection and that literature can contribute here, he argues against the practice of taking all the examples of our moral thinking from fiction, 'as the young and those who have led sheltered lives are apt to do.'⁷ While the propositional account does not propose that we derive all examples for moral thinking from literature, it does hold that literature can provide valuable moral material that may be unavailable through other means, and that certainly is unavailable through traditional philosophical reflection alone. However, insofar as it represents a more general objection to the use of literary examples in ethical reflection, as well as a limitation on the conditions in which literature might be valuable as a source of examples,

⁵ Nussbaum (1989), *op. cit.*, p. 3

⁶ Hare (1963), *op. cit.*, p. 183

⁷ *ibid.*

Hare's position merits closer examination for the issues it raises for the general relation between philosophical reflection and imaginative literature. If Hare's argument against taking *all* examples of our moral reasoning from literature implies that there is some general flaw in literature that limits its application to ethical reflection, then we must ask why we should take *any* examples from literature. What is the nature of this flaw and how relevant is it to moral thought? If *some* examples are valuable adjuncts to moral thought, then what do the examples that are not valuable lack? The question is thus: What makes a work of literature valuable as a source of examples for moral thought? Conversely, what excludes a work of literature as a source of morally relevant examples? Hare makes two claims here: the first concerns the relevance to ethical reflection of literature and literary situations generally; the second concerns the incomparable value of direct experience.

In the first claim, Hare acknowledges that literary situations are not represented as actual historical fact; but, he says, 'they are claimed to be like situations which do occur – otherwise their relevance to moral thought would be small.'⁸ As he presents it, this criterion for the relevance and, hence, the value of imaginative literature to moral thought appears straightforward and uncontroversial. The criterion which excludes some works of literature from moral thought is easy to identify: if a literary situation is so implausible that we cannot make imaginative sense of its relation to life, then it lacks relevance to our moral thinking. But how plausible, how *realistic* must a story be for us profitably to use it as a supplement to ethical reflection? Hare qualifies his argument with two conditions that must obtain for a story to have value as a supplement to moral reflection: 'If therefore the reader senses that the descriptions lack verisimilitude, or that in an actual situation there would be morally relevant features which are suppressed in the story, the influence of the

⁸ *ibid.*

story on his moral thinking will be, rightly, diminished thereby.⁹ Hare's conditions have a direct bearing on the argument here that literature furnishes additional scope to ethical reflection, and that its connection with moral philosophy is valuable thereby. Indeed, Hare's first condition implies that a story's ability to 'influence' our ethical reflection turns on its verisimilitude, on how true or real it appears; that is to say, on how closely it resembles reality.

On the surface, this condition poses no special problems for the texts considered earlier: readers of Conrad, Achebe and Joyce will have little trouble accepting that the situations of moral seriousness represented in their works are realistic, that they are plausible depictions of how things might be for the characters immersed in situations so depicted, that they represent possible factual situations that, conceivably, *do* occur. Moreover, the extent to which these stories correspond to factual situations can be readily determined. Reliable history shows that the Belgian government actually sanctioned the exploitation of the Congo's indigenous workers. As an officer of the merchant marine himself, Conrad personally witnessed the effects of this exploitation and, by his own admission, communicating these to the reading public was a part of his aim in writing *Heart of Darkness*. The Biafran War is an historical event, and Chinua Achebe personally experienced the war and its effects on the innocent; his role in it, as well as his engagement with Biafran refugees, is well documented. It is accepted that Stephen Dedalus' fictional experiences are modelled on the early life experiences of his creator Joyce – certainly there are sufficient parallels in their stories, one real the other fictional, to lend credence to such a claim. While Styron's *Sophie's Choice* clearly meets the requirement for realism, the verisimilitude criterion appears problematic for Ivan's challenge. It is highly unlikely that we shall ever find a situation in reality which corresponds to the extreme dilemma it represents. However, a closer examination of the context in which Ivan's challenge is presented may yield a more favourable verdict. Insofar as it occurs as an episode of a wider,

⁹ *ibid.*

more realistic story, Ivan's challenge may well meet the verisimilitude criterion. Real life is full of people – not just philosophers – posing questions that are difficult or impossible to answer. *The Brothers Karamazov* is no less realistic because it has Ivan posing a question that Alyosha finds difficult or impossible to answer. Thus, while the terms of the hypothetical challenge may fall outside the bounds of reality, the realism of the novel itself is not adversely affected by the unusual situation presented for contemplation by Ivan. Moreover, as shown by *Sophie's Choice*, not all fictional dilemmas that offer extreme, horrid alternatives fall outside the bounds of possible reality.

If probative value attaches only to works of imaginative literature that closely resemble factual situations, then the situations represented in these texts clearly meet Hare's criterion for moral relevance. While they do not directly represent events that *actually* occurred, we are expected to accept, and have little trouble doing so, that they are much *like* situations that do actually occur, or might actually have occurred, and, hence, constitute relevant and valuable representations of ethical situations. Undoubtedly, Hare means to ascribe value to the close proximity between fact and fiction. His argument for the role of imagination in moral thought is centred on how we employ imagination to confront the *facts* of a situation of moral seriousness. He writes, 'and it makes a difference, as always, that they should really be facts.'¹⁰ In this respect, Hare's criterion resembles the demand made by Thomas Gradgrind in Dickens' *Hard Times*, a pre-eminent stickler for the facts:

'Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!'¹¹

¹⁰ Hare, *loc. cit.*

¹¹ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 1

But this condition is problematic in the context of imaginative literature's relevance to moral thought. Just as Gradgrind's view of the worthwhile life as a series of colourless arithmetic calculations limits his ability to experience life in all its colourful uncertainty, Hare's caveat that morally relevant literature must represent situations that are like those that *do* occur seriously limits its ability to furnish imaginative ethical possibilities that fall outside the scope of its reader's experience of reality. In so doing, given the essential nature of the literary enterprise, it virtually denies the value of creative fiction to ethical reflection. However, if it is true that a key aspect of literature's contribution to ethical reflection is its ability to propose to the imagination situations that induce readers to look at things in *new* ways, and if Hare is to accommodate literature as an aid to ethical reflection, then he needs to qualify his proviso that imaginative situations must closely resemble situations that *do* occur. *How* closely must a literary situation represent reality in order to be relevant to moral thought? How does Hare's criterion apply in judging when a work of literature qualifies as a valuable adjunct to philosophical reflection? Hare's argument must address these questions, lest it restrict the range of eligible literature to those works that furnish what has been called a 'pure representation' of reality and, in so doing, virtually deny the value of creative fiction altogether.¹²

As Sleinis describes it, the pure representation theory of art holds that 'the function of art is to represent, copy, imitate, reveal or describe some segment of reality as accurately and completely as possible.'¹³ He notes that this construal of art's function implies a 'strong criterion of aesthetic merit,' one that reveals a convergence between pure representation theory and Hare's account of the relevance and value of literature to moral thought: 'The more an artwork resembles the real thing – indeed, the more it can be mistaken for the real thing – the better it is as an artwork.'¹⁴ Thus the pure representation theory of art has serious

¹² Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 23ff.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 23

¹⁴ *ibid.*

implications for ascribing aesthetic value to works of literature, and to art generally. According to Sleinis, 'it implies that such uninspired things as wax fruit, plastic flowers, and full-scale models of battle scenes are aesthetically superior to paintings of fruit, flowers, or battles simply by being more accurate representations.'¹⁵ On this account, paradigms of valuable art include things like undistorted photographs taken at exposures that most closely resemble ambient light, realistic sculptures, and other such life-like representations. Consider the implications of this criterion for the role and value of creative literature in ethical reflection. Is an accurate description of an actual situation of ethical seriousness *necessarily* more valuable than an imaginative account of a possible ethical situation, one which specifically highlights certain ethical concepts? If this is so, then Hare's argument for the relevance of imaginative literature is misplaced and self-defeating. He stipulates a condition for the inclusion of fiction in moral thought that all but excludes fiction from his account of its value.

Two main problems render the verisimilitude criterion especially troublesome both for Hare's argument and for the connection between literature and ethical reflection, and more generally for the pure representation theory itself. The first derives from an inherent difficulty in the pure representation theory of art. The second concerns literature's ability to furnish new perspectives on the world. Both problems have serious negative implications for Hare's account of the value of literature to ethical reflection.

First, Hare's position implies that, all else being equal, the closer a situation depicted in a work of literature resembles the real world, the more valuable it is to moral thought. Therefore, maximum value attaches to literary works that accurately represent factual situations and whose stories, characters and plots closely correspond to these factual situations; that is to say, works of extreme realism. In this respect, Hare's verisimilitude criterion corresponds to the criterion of aesthetic merit

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 28

implicit in the pure representation theory of art. On this criterion, the most valuable work of fiction is thus hardly fictional at all - or perhaps a fictionalised yet factually accurate re-construction of an actual event, with only the characters' names changed to protect their true identities.

However, the authority of the verisimilitude criterion is undermined by a number of objections that stand against the pure representation theory of art. In *The Principles of Art*, for instance, R. G. Collingwood decisively rejects verisimilitude as the supreme measure of an artwork's value:

A portrait...is a work of representation. What the patron demands is a good likeness; and that is what the painter aims, and successfully, if he is a competent painter, at producing. It is not a difficult thing to do; and we may reasonably assume that in portraits by great painters such as Raphael, Titian, Velazquez, or Rembrandt is has been done. But, however reasonable the assumption may be, it is an assumption and nothing more. The sitters are dead and gone, and we cannot check the likeness for ourselves. If, therefore, the only kind of merit a portrait could have were its likeness to the sitter, we could not possibly distinguish, except where the sitter is still alive and unchanged, between a good portrait and a bad.¹⁶

Graham regards Collingwood's argument as a 'conclusive refutation of the idea that what is valuable in portraiture is ... its capacity for producing a convincing resemblance.'¹⁷ The verisimilitude criterion is further undermined, and with it the pure representation theory, when we consider the converse of Collingwood's argument: if we cannot judge an artwork's value without a direct comparison with its subject, what of works produced by artists who themselves had no direct access to their subjects? As Sleinis observes, the verisimilitude criterion for the value of art is inapplicable to many significant artworks that are generally considered to be representational:

Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, and Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* cannot be pure representations. Botticelli was not present at the birth of Venus, Leonardo was not present at the last supper, and Michelangelo was not present at the last judgement. None of these are pure representations of

¹⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 44

¹⁷ Graham (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 55

events witnessed by the artist. Far from being pure representations, they are more nearly works of pure imagination.¹⁸

Graham maintains that aesthetic value does not turn solely on verisimilitude and agrees that we can discern good portraiture without direct access to the sitter's appearance. It follows, he says, 'that what matters is not faithful copying of the original.'¹⁹ While Collingwood's argument specifically refers to portraiture, its implications are for art more generally. As Graham writes, 'we can profitably read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* without knowing whether he has accurately represented the history of the Napoleonic Wars, we can watch Eisenstein's *Oktober* without worrying about the actual course of the Russian Revolution.'²⁰ If Graham is right, then value attaches to art independently of verisimilitude.

But these issues principally concern aesthetic value; how do they bear on Hare's account of literature's value to moral thought? The simple answer is that the same problems that confront the pure representation theory's criterion for aesthetic merit also confront any theory for the value of literature to moral thought that turns on the same criterion. That is, if Hare's argument that the more closely a literary example resembles reality the more relevant it is to moral thought is to apply to the role for literature in ethical reflection, then this criterion for relevance meets a major practical obstacle, the same obstacle that undermines the pure representation theory. Without direct access to the reality, to all the 'facts' that a literary situation is supposed to represent, how can the reader assess verisimilitude and hence, relevance?

The common point in Sleinis', Graham's and Collingwood's arguments is that we cannot judge a work's aesthetic value by its historical accuracy, or by how closely it resembles the 'facts' that it might be said to represent. The same argument applies to a work's relevance to ethical reflection. We can profitably reflect on the ethical significance of Conrad's

¹⁸ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 28

¹⁹ Graham, *loc. cit.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

Heart of Darkness without knowing how closely his novel corresponds with his own experience of the Congo. In reading *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, we gain valuable insight into the conflict between duty and impulse without worrying about how strictly autobiographical Joyce's story is. We can be moved by the fate of Achebe's refugee mother and child without having to believe that they are real victims of war. The point is that imaginative literature can explore ethical concepts with a freedom that is unavailable through other means. Arguments that make value depend on the proximity of fiction to the facts that it is intended to represent miss this point. As Graham writes: '*War and Peace* is wrongly regarded as a record of the impact the Napoleonic Wars had on Russia, but not wrongly regarded as in part an image of the impact of war in general.'²¹ This is precisely how value attaches to Conrad's, Achebe's and Joyce's works and not by fulfilling the verisimilitude criterion of pure representation. Thus it would be wrong to regard *Heart of Darkness* as a record of the specific effects of exploitation on the workers encountered by Marlow, but not wrong to regard it as an image of commercial exploitation in general. It would be wrong to regard *Refugee Mother and Child* as a record of the suffering inflicted on the mother and her dying son as actual persons, but not wrong to regard it as an image of the suffering inflicted by war in general. It would be wrong to regard *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a record of an actual Dedalus' adolescent vicissitudes, but not wrong to regard it as in part an image of the conflicts and moral tensions of adolescence in general. It would be wrong to regard Ivan's challenge as closely representing the kind of choice we may be forced to make in real life, but not wrong to regard it as an example of the kind of dilemmas invoked to challenge someone's moral presuppositions or to test a moral theory. It would be wrong to regard *Sophie's Choice* as a record of a specific act of cruelty inflicted on a concrete individual, but not wrong to regard it as a vivid image of the cruelty often inflicted on innocent persons by Nazi officials during the Second World War. Graham's argument here has genuine merit:

²¹ Graham, *loc. cit.*

we can employ the fictional lives of individuals in literature to examine the ramifications of moral concepts and their implications for ethics and ethical theory.

Further, Hare's position implies that besides the content of literary stories, *what* is represented, a work's stylistic aspects, *how* it is represented, also matters. As already argued, the integrity of a work of literature consists in the unity of its form and content, in the melding of its story and its narrative devices. It is difficult to separate what is told from how it is told, but, insofar as it can have bearing on the meaning and ethical significance of a literary depiction, the 'how' matters. Yet in a pure representation, such devices only detract from its value to moral thought. Indeed, if employed beyond the mere necessity of efficient description, they would disqualify the work as one of pure representation. According to the pure representation theory, devices such as metaphor, irony, synecdoche, hyperbole and others are mere embellishments to a work's content, a haze of words and images through which the reader must peer in order to gain clear sight of the reality represented in the work. Indeed, the better the representation, the more accurately it mimics reality, the more literal the language and the fewer the stylistic devices, and vice versa: the greater the stylistic devices, the more imaginative the language, the less directly a work mimics reality and, hence, the less relevant it is to moral thought. In D. H. Lawrence's *The Fox*, for instance, all the allusions, images, motifs, and metaphors are merely stylistic devices that cloud our view of the all important fact that young Henry Grenfell deliberately felled a tree to land on and kill Jill Banford as part of his plan to win Nellie March and, with her, control of Bailey Farm.²² In *Heart of Darkness* the indigenous workers ought not to be 'black bones' and 'moribund shadows of disease and starvation,' but Congolese nationals who unwittingly signed up for hard labour in unexpectedly harsh conditions. However, as already argued, manner of presentation bears heavily on a literary representation's value, and on what it can reveal about the ethical situation and its implications for

ethical issues. If this argument is sound, then literary devices such as simile and metaphor play a pivotal role in literature's contribution to ethical reflection and *ipso facto* serve further to undermine the verisimilitude criterion.

The second major difficulty in applying the verisimilitude criterion to literature's use in ethical reflection concerns the perspectives furnished by imaginative literature. According to the propositional account, literature can present to the imagination new ways of looking at ethical situations and, hence, illustrate, reveal, elucidate or remind us of some ethical fact or possibility and thereby contribute positively to moral thought, in a way not available through other means. It is the new perspectives offered only through literary art that, at least in part, render valuable the connection between literature and moral philosophy. But, for reasons shown above, the verisimilitude criterion entailed in the pure representation theory of art is inapplicable to a range of ethically valuable literature and, as such, excludes valuable perspectives from which to reflect on ethical significance. As Sleinis argues, 'the theory fails to accommodate the pretheoretically inchoate sense that art furnishes what we cannot obtain elsewhere and thus threatens to trivialize art.'²³ Hare's argument seems to embody the pure representation theory, but when applied to literature's relevance to moral thought, it severely limits new perspectives that could be furnished by less directly representational literature. According to Sleinis:

Even when original sources of rewarding experiences are absent, those rewarding experiences remain available through representation of their sources. So even in the pure representation theory, art has a significant capacity to increase value, but notably it fails to deliver any essentially new experiences or new values.²⁴

If, as Hare enjoins, we need to gauge a work's value on how closely it resembles reality, and if our conception of reality is best formed by our *direct* experience of it, then valuable literature can only be literature that

²² D. H. Lawrence, *The Fox*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994)

²³ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30

²⁴ *ibid.*

represents or confirms or fits our prior perspectives on the world. However, if the point of incorporating literature into ethical reflection is that it delivers *new* ethical experiences, values and viewpoints, then Hare's stipulation is counterproductive and undermines literature's ability to make this contribution, limiting its role to providing close representations of reality that only embody narrow empirically grounded perspectives. Sleinis questions the qualitative value of this contribution:

Apart from representations freeing us from practical action in relation to objects of awareness, representations multiply old values rather than creating new ones. Here the increase in value furnished by art is quantitative rather than qualitative.²⁵

Kearney cites Aristotle's *Poetics* in his argument supporting the ethical value of less 'pure' literary representation: '*Mimesis* is not about idealist escapism or servile realism. It is a pathway to the disclosure of the inherent "universals" of existence that make up human truth.'²⁶ The argument here is that access to certain ethical truths is unavailable through conventional perspectives. the implicit argument is that the quantitative contribution of pure representation, while valuable in some respects, falls short of the qualitative contribution furnished by the freer representations of reality that Hare seems to reject: 'Far from being a passive copy of reality, *mimesis* re-enacts the real world of action by magnifying its essential traits. It remakes the world, so to speak, in light of its potential truths.'²⁷ Sleinis agrees, and observes that, at least for literary works considered in relation to representation theory, '... the essential aim is in some sense to tell the truth about the world or some aspect of it.'²⁸ As argued earlier, truths about some aspects of the world may not be accessible through conventional perspectives or by direct access to the facts of a situation; some may only be apprehended via the faculty of imagination. Comprehension and, hence, ethical understanding, of Henry Grenfell's motives for killing Banford in Lawrence's *The Fox* is not mediated by a pure

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 131

²⁷ *ibid.*

representation of the possible facts of the situation, but through entering the minds of the characters and apprehending their reasons for action. Here plausibility is not entirely dependent on realism, as Hare's position implies, but depends on imaginative engagement with the story. The story is fictional, a product of the writer's imagination, and, insofar as it tends towards its own elucidation, there are no corresponding 'facts' against which to check its verisimilitude. The reader cannot interview the 'real' Henry Grenfell to discuss his true motives for killing Banford. That envy and lust number among the 'universals' of human existence and lead to unethical acts is a given, but in the absence of direct access to these emotions and their effects, arguably the closest one comes to apprehending their impact is via the imaginative faculty.

Hare's limitation on the range of ethically valuable literature excludes from serious consideration less directly representational material, reflection on which could fruitfully yield valuable moral insights. What of less plausible depictions in which *fancy*, rather than fact, plays an especially important role, and in which certain less straightforward demands are placed on the reader's imaginative faculty? For example, I am confident that I shall *never* wake up and find myself in the body of a cockroach, with a cockroach's-eye view of the world; but with only slight effort of imagination I can envisage reality as seen through the eyes of such a creature and apprehend its moral possibilities from that new perspective by reflecting on Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. While J. L. Austin was lost for words to describe the predicament imagined in Kafka's novel – 'transmogrification' is perhaps the most apt – he had, and the intelligent reader shares this ability, little trouble grasping the scenario it entails and envisioning its moral significance.²⁹ Nor can I actually enter the mind and body of a wild wolf; but reflecting on Jack London's *White Fang* furnishes a new and wholly plausible perspective on the moral relationship between

²⁸ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 49

²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "Oxford and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy" in *Essays on J. L. Austin*, cited in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 6th Edn, (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

humankind and the other sentient creatures with which we share a common environment. Such perspectives clearly are unavailable in reality, but the fact that a reader can make imaginative sense of the moral possibilities they entail, and may develop ethical insights thereby, qualifies them as relevant and valuable adjuncts to moral thought.

Charges of implausibility are not limited to the seemingly more outlandish scenarios presented in creative literature. For example, not only have Hardy's narratives been accused of possessing unnecessarily complicated plots, the plots themselves are often considered implausible in the degree of chance and coincidence that dictates relations between characters and events. As Tanner observes in his discussion of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*:

In the vast empty landscapes of Hardy's world, people's paths cross according to some mysterious logic – that same imponderable structuring of things in time which brought the *Titanic* and the iceberg together at one point in the trackless night sea.³⁰

He argues, 'on the level of everyday plausibility and probability' many of the causally significant events described in the novel are the products of 'too freakish a chance.'³¹ Were it not so tragic, the chain of events that included Tess' seduction and rape, the birth and death of her child, her meeting and falling in love with Clare, her failed attempts at informing him of her past, the circumstances of her ultimate revelation and his response, the missed communiqués and misunderstandings that led her back to Alec, her murdering him on Clare's return and forgiveness, and her subsequent capture and execution would constitute an improbable comedy of errors the mysterious logic of which only Hardy, as its progenitor, would be able to divine. But mere improbability does not necessarily render the causal relations between events in Tess' story implausible or nonsensical. The *Titanic* did, after all, meet the iceberg at that point in the vast and trackless

³⁰ Tony Tanner, 'Colour and Movement in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*,' in I. Watt, ed., *The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism*, (London: OUP, 1971), p. 407

³¹ *ibid.*

Atlantic. And Hardy does furnish sufficient data for the reader to discern the moral significance of the chain of events that led to Tess' fall and ultimate demise. He even nominates the phases of the story and, in so doing, illuminates their causal relations. As Tanner notes of the plot sequence:

we see at once that the overall architecture of the novel is blocked out with massive simplicity in a series of balancing phases – The Maiden, Maiden No More; The Rally, The Consequence; and so on.³²

While this leads Tanner to concede that Hardy's art is 'not subtle in the way that James and many subsequent writers are subtle,'³³ there is nevertheless value in the bold structure and complexity of Hardy's plot. 'I think it is clear,' he writes, 'that Hardy derives his great power from that very "crudity" which, in its impersonal indifference to plausibility and rational cause and effect, enhances the visibility of the most basic lineaments of the tale.'³⁴ And it is this vivification of its distinctive features that allows the reader to discern as an object for ethical reflection the novel's central theme, what Dorothy van Ghent terms 'the precariousness of moral consciousness in its brute instinctual and physical circumstances.'³⁵

Reality and the Free Scope of Fiction

While the perspectives furnished by *The Metamorphosis* and *White Fang* are clearly unavailable via pure representations of reality, and the chain of events that precipitates Tess' fall may strike one as inherently improbable, they nonetheless appear as representations of possible states of affairs to which ethical significance attaches and may thus offer access to ethical insights that are unavailable via other means. It is the possibilities they furnish for *mimetic hypothesis* that makes them valuable in this regard. Consider some questions that may be addressed to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

³² *ibid.*, p. 409

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Dorothy van Ghent, *On Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, in M. Schroder, ed., *Modern British Fiction*, (Oxford: OUP, 1961), p. 30

It is unlikely that I will be beset by the events that trouble Tess, but *if I were*, how would I act? What would Kantian ethics require me to do here? Is the imbalance between will, action and consequence really as severe as it is portrayed in the novel? How would utilitarianism evaluate Tess' situation? Whose happiness is or will be affected by her choices? Does either theory offer an adequate perspective from which to appraise Tess' actions and character? If not, what features of her situation are not accommodated? What if I were in Angel Clare's shoes? How would I react at the news of my betrothed's past? Given the convolution of causal factors presented, however improbable, and given her ultimate detachment from reality which led her to kill Alec, is Tess nonetheless a virtuous person? Is Angel Clare? Is Alec D'Urberville truly the vicious character he seems? While one may doubt the everyday plausibility and probability of the situation in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, one can make imaginative sense of it. Moreover, unlike many schematised hypothetical examples (as discussed later in this chapter), the novel contains sufficient data to formulate meaningful responses to these questions. But arguing that the verisimilitude criterion is misguided, and, hence, that Hare's account of literature's contribution to ethical reflection is wrong, merely addresses one kind of objection to the positive relation between ethics and literature. It does not deal with the issues raised earlier about the value of direct experience entailed in the questions: 'Why consult literature? Why not consult the world directly for the truths we seek?'³⁶

In addressing these questions, Hare's position seems more compelling. Indeed, he places special emphasis on the role for direct experience in moral thought:

A few months spent as a coolie building the Burma railway is worth more to one's moral thinking than the reading of a great many novels or even factual reports about underdeveloped countries.³⁷

³⁶ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 49

³⁷ Hare, *loc. cit.*

To a certain extent, Hare has a point. It is unlikely that any fictional account of a situation of moral seriousness can furnish an understanding or appreciation of its moral significance in quite the same way as can a real-life situation in which one is immersed or with which one has had direct experience. But does direct experience always lead to more valuable moral thinking? A practical barrier exists to moral thought informed by direct experience. Without diminishing the value of the experiences of those who are actually immersed in situations of moral seriousness, it is highly unlikely that many persons engaged in ethical reflection can choose to serve time as a coolie on some contemporary equivalent to the Burma railway. While Hare's point that 'some experience of actual moral perplexities, and of the actual consequences of certain moral choices'³⁸ is necessary to the formation of sound, mature moral judgements has merit, most people simply lack the opportunity to directly experience a sufficiently wide range of ethical situations to make informed judgements concerning the applications and implications of a moral theory. Thus, as argued earlier, in the absence of direct experience from which to evaluate our own subjective response to moral situations and hence contribute to our self-understanding, literature can provide vicarious experiential possibilities that are not available through abstract reasoning. For inferences concerning the truth or plausibility of ethical propositions to be persuasive, inductive conclusions need to be drawn from as many instances of ethical behaviour as possible. To be sure, I can garner some from direct experience, more still from the accounts of others' experiences, but there are severe practical limitations on my ability to access ethical data by these means. On the other hand, there are countless fictional instantiations of possibilities of ethical seriousness, any number of which I can access without practical barrier.

Moreover, it is not always true that direct experience can furnish more valuable possibilities for moral reflection than can be derived from other means. While it is true that my experience of the heat, dust, pain and

³⁸ *ibid.*

degradation of forced labour will endow me with an incomparably clear impression of the heat, dust, pain and degradation of forced labour, it does not follow that I will derive an incomparably clear view of the ethical significance and implications of my situation, especially not while I am trying to cope with the heat, dust, pain and degradation of forced labour. In *Art and Freedom*, Sleinis proposes that not only are contemplators of literature freed from the physical constraints of reality that limit the agent's capacity to experience and reflect on ethical considerations, but that they are also liberated from the need to act on emotional responses to literary situations as they would when confronted by such situations in reality. As he writes:

The fear generated by an approaching wild tiger is unsuitable for exclusive introspection; the circumstances demand attention to urgent tasks such as accurate assessment of danger and execution of appropriate courses of action.³⁹

J. R. R. Tolkien endorses the point in his description of his own childhood passion for fiction:

Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faerie. I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood, intruding into my relatively safe world, in which it was, for instance, possible to read stories in peace of mind, free from fear.⁴⁰

This severance between real-life and literary presentations of life-like situations furnishes the reader with opportunities for making reflective judgements about a situation that are simply not available in an agent's real-life deliberative field. Take *Heart of Darkness*. Confronted by a scene of utter degradation, Marlow is immersed in a situation in which noise, dust, heat, and the disorientation experienced in a new environment prevents him from focussing exclusively on the ethical dimension of the situation. This leads him to respond intuitively rather than to reflect on the moral

³⁹ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 9

⁴⁰ Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories' in *The Tolkien Reader*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 65.

seriousness of the scene and contemplate his duty concerning interaction with the indigenous workers and their employer. In 'real time' his exposure to the workers' suffering would endure at the longest a few moments, during which he must also attend to the pressing tasks of gaining his bearings and ensuring his continuing safety in what must be rather hostile circumstances for a person just arrived from a less challenging European environment. However, readers are not under the same environmental pressures to act as Marlow is, and, as such, are free to contemplate the scene and reflect with equanimity on its moral significance. As Sleinis maintains:

Literary presentations typically generate lifelike situations to which the behaviour appropriate and possible when generated by the actual life situations is either impossible or inappropriate.⁴¹

In real life, when immersed in such a situation as Marlow's, it would be inappropriate and virtually impossible to engage in the kind of sustained contemplation of the implications of following through a particular ethical theory that characterises the preceding discussion.

Further, in real life there is a strong connection between thinking and acting. In many real situations, the agent cannot afford the luxury of hesitation. Consider the cases of the inquiring murderer or another life-threatening situation, or that of a drowning child in which a potential rescuer's only means of saving the child's life is an almost instantaneous response. In contemplating a literary scene, on the other hand, Sleinis writes, 'actions and responses have nowhere to go' and that, because of this, 'internal states attain an intensity that they lack where the aroused states discharge themselves in direct action and response.'⁴² Where Marlow discharges his aroused pity by direct action (his gesture with the biscuit), the reader's emotional response to the scene has no such outlet and, thus, intensifies. The argument here is that the reader's enhanced apprehension of the worker's plight accentuates his or her take on the ethical seriousness

⁴¹ Sleinis, *loc. cit.*

⁴² *ibid.*

of their situation, one that is not available from a mere rational estimation of duty or clinical calculation of overall utility. The same applies to the reader's apprehension of the refugee mother and her child in Achebe's poem: the scene's pathos generates a sense of pity that is at odds with the just-war arguments used to justify their situation, and the intensity of the response results in an enhanced apprehension of the ethical significance of their predicament. Sleinis accepts that this conflicts with Aristotle's notion of *catharsis*, in which a spectator's fear and pity are discharged by exposure to dramatic presentations that arouse these feelings; however, he suggests that Nietzsche's claim that the contemplation of these situations 'is more likely to make spectators more fearful and pitying' is more probably correct.⁴³ As Kearney argues, 'The narrated action of a drama ...solicits a mode of sympathy more extensive and resonant than that experienced in everyday life.'⁴⁴ In a claim that closely corresponds to the attitudinal account, he writes that in extending our moral experience, albeit vicarious, literature provides opportunities for the development of ethical sensitivity that are wider than those available via direct experience:

And it does so not simply because it enjoys the poetic licence to suspend our normal protective reflexes (which guard us from pain) but because it amplifies the range of those we might empathise with - reaching beyond family, friends and familiars to all kinds of foreigners. If we read *Oedipus Rex*, we experience what it is like to be a Greek who murders his father and marries his mother. If we read *Anna Karenina*, we experience the tragic fate of a passionate woman in nineteenth-century Russia. If we read *Scarlet and Black*, we relive the life of an erratic, wilful youth in Napoleonic France.⁴⁵

To be sure, these narratives only show us what it *might* be like to experience the world from the perspectives furnished, but genuinely and imaginatively engaging with the texts can nevertheless arouse feelings that are unavailable via abstract discourse. If this is so, then the arousal of

⁴³ Sleinis, *op. cit.*, p. 10 (Nietzsche *The Will to Power*, §851)

⁴⁴ Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 138

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 138-139

intense feelings presents clear opportunities for moral agents to assess their own emotional responses to a theory's implications.

Moreover, if one is under no obligation to act, then the response is purer. That is, it is free of the burden of having to act and, as such, gives a clearer idea of the implications of making and acting on moral judgements. In reflecting on their enhanced responses to situations of moral seriousness, readers of literature can glean important data about their own moral understanding that is unavailable either in real-life, or from a mere rational engagement with the traditional discourse of moral philosophy. Cunningham argues that literature can function both as a 'kind of ethical filter' and a 'powerful diagnostic tool.'⁴⁶ He writes:

Literature can filter moral experience by heightening our attention to what should be morally salient and by directing us away from less crucial elements that can distract us from more important things. And literature can help us to diagnose by taking us places that are difficult and even impossible for us to visit, much less understand, in actual experience.⁴⁷

He proceeds, 'Literature's picture of human character can often be clearer than we can reasonably expect from lived experience, and in some cases the vicarious experience may be the only kind available to us.'⁴⁸ His argument here clearly fits with Sleinis' position and also supports Ducasse's claim that the ethical value of 'literary' experience is grounded in the reader's ability to enter imaginatively into situations for which opportunities for engagement or performance do not occur in real life.⁴⁹

The psychological complexity relevant to ethical judgements can be revealed by employing literature as a tool for imaginative engagement and diagnosis, and further reflection can reveal how such complexities can be accommodated in an ethical theory, or else how moral prescriptions can be acted on in light of this complexity. For instance, could the reader of *Sophie's Choice*, if placed in Sophie's position, reconcile his or her natural

⁴⁶ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 84

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Ducasse, *loc. cit.*

and powerful emotional response to the dilemma with Mill's impartiality requirement? As Cunningham argues, 'knowing how to live and what sort of person to be is integrally connected with feeling.'⁵⁰ He believes that 'Good character involves seeing the world in particular ways,'⁵¹ and that fine literary depictions 'can help us see by helping us to feel the right things at the right times, to the right degree, toward the right objects.'⁵² By thus sharpening the agent's ability to perceive the nuances and subtleties of ethical judgements, examining these feelings helps to develop the kind of moral capacities deemed necessary by Nussbaum for making reality out of worthwhile ethical prescriptions.

The claims above conflict with what Peter Winch considers is a 'fairly well-established ... tradition in recent Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy;' namely, the use of simplified examples to illustrate and test moral perspectives.⁵³ According to Phillips, 'the rationale of this view is that such examples do not generate the emotion which is liable to surround more serious cases and thus enable us to look more coolly at the logical issues involved.'⁵⁴ But moral philosophy is about more than the examination of moral concepts and their logical relations and, as has been argued, an adequate account of ethics must accommodate the emotional dimension of human life. As Phillips sees it, this simplification of the ethical can impose boundaries that are too narrow to accommodate the complexity of moral judgements. The simple examples employed to illustrate or challenge a moral perspective omit too much crucial information to be effective, and can all too easily collapse into mere caricature.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 5

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Peter Winch, "The Universalisability of Moral Judgements," in *Ethics and Action*, p. 154

⁵⁴ Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 9

Historical Facts and the Freedom of Fiction

McGinn argues that fiction is of particular diagnostic value when testing a moral theory and its implications:

The strength of an ethical idea lies in its applications, in how it *plays out*. In fiction, we can put an ethical idea through its paces, testing its ability to command our assent. We can also explore its alignments, limitations, repercussions. We can face moral reality in all its complexity and drama.⁵⁵

He argues that in reading fiction we are not subject to the opacity that affects us when engaging with people in real life, and that we are unencumbered by 'the problem of what really happened, of what somebody's motivation really was.'⁵⁶ He observes that the creative writer simply tells the reader what is true of the characters and the situations in which they are immersed, and that this furnishes the reader with all the information needed to ground a moral assessment of the situation presented in the work. Graham suggests that the distinction between fact and fiction highlights the advantage of using fiction in ethical reflection rather than the accounts of actual events and situations recorded in historical narratives. While the historian and his or her readers are burdened by the problem of what really happened, the creative writer is encumbered by no such obligation. He argues that the significance of fiction can be revealed by a comparison between the hindsight of the historian and the *dénouement* of the writer of imaginative literature:

While the historian, with the benefit of hindsight *discovers* events to be significantly related and assembles evidence to persuade us of his conclusion, the novelist with imagination *makes* the events relevant, and uses *dénouement* to direct the mind of the reader into seeing a special relation between them.⁵⁷

Graham argues, 'an author can construct a story that obliges us to attribute certain significance to the events related.'⁵⁸ As has been shown, the structuring of a story in terms of the relations between events is a function

⁵⁵ McGinn, *op. cit.*, p. 176

⁵⁶ *ibid.* p. 177

⁵⁷ Graham (1997), p. 124

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

of its plot, and it is this very feature that makes certain extended narratives valuable to ethical reflection.

Nussbaum draws on Aristotle's account of art in the *Poetics* to describe an additional advantage of imaginative literature over historical narrative. She argues that, in showing us things that *might* happen in a human life, rather than simply furnishing a record of occurrences, imaginative literature can represent general possibilities for human lives: 'Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves.'⁵⁹ Her position tallies with Ducasse's inasmuch as she emphasises the value of vicarious experiences garnered through reading. She makes the point that, unlike most histories, 'literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences.'⁶⁰ For Nussbaum, the way a literary work addresses its audience conveys a sense 'that there are links of possibility, at least on a very general level, between the characters and the reader.'⁶¹ This possible connection, she says, arouses the reader's imagination and results in a heightening of emotions concerning the moral aspects of the story. She suggests that good literature 'is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not,'⁶² and that this furnishes opportunities for imaginative engagement with ethical issues that are unavailable except by reflection on our emotional responses. She further argues, 'Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles.'⁶³ However, the intensity of this disconcertion and puzzlement can be harnessed to help fulfil the dual function of the connection between literature and philosophical ethics envisaged in this thesis.

For instance, while the brutality and pure horror of the Holocaust is almost incomprehensible, the genocide it describes is itself a concept of scale. It is almost too large and, in its largeness, almost too horrific to

⁵⁹ Nussbaum (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 5

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

imagine. The idea of six million deaths, deliberately caused, and for no reason other than to satisfy a small number of people's desire for groundless ethnic supremacy, is beyond the capacity of most people to visualise. The number is too big, the systematic destruction of human life too comprehensive and too vast. Moreover, the historical record of six million deaths between nineteen thirty six and nineteen forty five seems unable adequately to accommodate the sheer paradigm-shifting moral significance of the bewildering reality of genocide. Dates and numbers, no matter how big, fail to convey the real cost to humanity and, as such, fail to do justice to individuals as unique perspectives on the world. As Judith Miller writes, 'We must remind ourselves that the Holocaust was not six million, it was one plus one plus one plus one.'⁶⁴ By furnishing a view of history via the individual victim's perspective, however, narrative can make the incomprehensible intelligible, and give ethical meaning to the historical statistics of genocide. Kearney argues that, in this context, 'Stories bring the horror home to us. They singularise suffering against the anonymity of evil.'⁶⁵ But whereas the historical record fails to do justice to the horror of a situation, actual accounts from individuals may be too horrific to recount, and too horrific for the reader to contemplate: '...if the testimony is too immediate, we are blinded by the experience.'⁶⁶ Kearney suggests, 'sometimes an ethics of memory is obliged to resort to an aesthetics of storytelling.'⁶⁷ He cites Ricoeur's notion that 'fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator ... eyes to see and to weep One counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims.'⁶⁸ Kearney claims that a key function of narrative is to elicit empathy, and that the development of what he terms 'narrative sympathy' allows the reader to see the world through the eyes of the character and, to a certain valuable degree, to feel what they must feel. He writes:

⁶⁴ Judith Miller, *One, By One, by One: facing the Holocaust*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 287

⁶⁵ Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 62

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 60

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 62

It is, as Kant noted in his account of 'representative thinking' in the Third Critique, a way of identifying with as many fellow humans as possible – actors and sufferers alike – in order to participate in a common moral sense (*sesus communis*).⁶⁹

This is brought out powerfully by the example of *Sophie's Choice*. Like Bennett, we may *comprehend* Himmler's anguish over fulfilling his perceived duty to order the deaths of millions of innocent people. And when we count the cadavers he accumulated, we are appalled at the number. But, Kearney argues, readers need more than to become intellectually aware of history's horrors, 'they also need to experience the horror of that suffering *as if* they were actually there.'⁷⁰ Thus, in light of Himmler's admission, we may identify with him as an actor and grasp his moral turmoil and remorse; but when we consider his actions in terms of the death, pain and utter degradation experienced by individual persons at the hands of his subordinates, such as is depicted in the crushing dilemma in *Sophie's Choice*, we can never *sympathise* with him. And we can never applaud his adherence to the ethical principles he chose to embrace at the cost of his humanity. Moreover, 'seeing' the Holocaust through the eyes of one of its minute particulars allows the reader not only to reflect on the powerful and often puzzling emotions generated by this experience, it also reveals the *individual* nature of horror. Experiencing Sophie's turmoil as if one were there, indeed, as if one were Sophie, generates a perspective from which one could never condone the doctor's sadism, and never accept the legitimacy of the regime, and the moral system it embraced. But we are not blinded by the experience. Knowing that Sophie's situation is fictional, no matter how representational it is of the kind of horror inflicted by the Nazi regime, affords us a degree of critical distance, but not disinterest, from which to appraise the situation and evaluate our responses to it.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 63

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ To a degree, this kind of distance corresponds with the first kind identified by Oswald Hanfling, distance from the 'practical side of things,' in his article 'Five Kinds of Distance,' in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 40, no. 1 (January 2000). For the arguments to which

If Nussbaum's, Sleinis' and Kearney's accounts of the value of emotional responses to literary situations are correct, and if these empathic responses are typically not aroused by reading conventional histories and biographies, then the advantage of imaginative literature over these forms of narrative becomes evident. These arguments reveal that such engagement significantly enhances the benefits to ethical reflection of imaginative literature not only to illuminate and test an ethical theory's specific implications, but also to reveal and clarify our emotional responses and, thus, uncover the extent to which that theory conflicts with the deeper values that underlie our own moral convictions. Moreover, if empathy is held to be a valuable capacity that assists us to evaluate our ethical principles, then literature's ability to elicit narrative sympathy must surely afford it a high place as a supplement to ethical reflection.

There is a further advantage to fictional narratives over factual accounts of actual events and situations. Moral judgements made in respect of fictional situations free the reader from a number of implications that would follow if such judgements were made in real life. McGinn argues that using literature to examine an ethical perspective has the additional advantage 'that no real person's fate turns upon what you judge, so you feel freer to explore and condemn what is presented.'⁷² He argues:

The fictional world is really the ideal world in which to go on ethical expeditions: it is safe, convenient, inconsequential, and expressly designed for our exploration and delight.⁷³

As a thought experiment, reflecting on Ivan's challenge is as safe, convenient and inconsequential as McGinn suggests. In exploring the ethical implications of acting in one way or the other, no actual 'little child that beats its breast with its little fists' will suffer torture unto death, and no 'edifice of human fortune' will be founded 'on its unavenged tears.' Nor

Oswald's paper is in part a response, see Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance" as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle,' *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. V (1912).

⁷² McGinn, *op. cit.*

⁷³ *ibid.*

does the happiness and contentment of humanity turn on whether she is tortured to death or spared. Moreover, in what constitutes a form of meta-narrative, in the novel itself, Alyosha is free to deliberate on his reply to Ivan, and the novel's reader can explore with equanimity both the scenario, which yields valuable data with which to consider an ethical perspective, as well as Alyosha's response to it, which provides insight into his character and raw material for concrete, particular deliberation.

However, even if these thought experiments are useful in drawing out the implications of an ethical perspective, and however valuable the fictional accounts of Marlow's encounter with the indigenous workers, Dedalus' moral anguish, the plight of the Biafran mother and child, and the dilemma presented by Ivan's challenge may be, and whatever the advantages are of fictional accounts over other forms of narrative, it remains to ask: why do we need imaginative literature of the forms discussed here when, with imagination and creative thought, we can construct realistic and thought-provoking scenarios that can arguably equally well illuminate aspects of the ethical theories that we are examining? To obtain a reasonable idea of what it means to be confronted by a moral dilemma or of how the application of a theory's prescriptions can help us to make an ethical choice, why not just refer to a creative scenario or hypothetical example? I will argue that the complexity of ethical judgements generally precludes being adequately dealt with by the kind of simplified thought experiments that have traditionally been employed to supplement philosophical inquiry. I will further argue that if value attaches to literary supplements that do accommodate complexity, then the novel emerges as the ascendant narrative form.

The Role of Schematic Thought Experiments

In investigating a moral theory, philosophers often construct hypothetical examples or thought experiments to amplify their arguments. We have already encountered Kant's Inquiring Murderer and his hypothetical prosperous but miserly individual who withholds his charity and, thus,

acts as though he wills that the principle of miserliness become a universal law. However, while to a degree illuminating, these 'hypotheticals' provide only simplified situations of moral seriousness. They are often created within the same narrow boundaries as the theory itself and, as a result, remain in the same abstract realm as the principle they are intended to illustrate, test, or instantiate. While simple hypothetical situations may effectively illustrate a philosopher's argument, they do not significantly contribute to our subjective understanding of the human issues that lie at the foundation of morality, nor do they adequately accommodate the psychological complexities that inhere in unique moral situations. Other issues arise directly from the examples themselves. What of the scenarios presented in these hypotheticals, are they realistic enough to provoke a meaningful response? What of the issues or solutions they are said to illustrate - are they plausible? Realistic? Are they consistent with a wider context? What practical wisdom can be gleaned from such examples? Moreover, just how important are these issues? While Williams himself employs a number of these thought experiments in his critique of utilitarianism, he acknowledges the shortcomings of such schematised examples. He argues:

There are two ways in particular in which examples in moral philosophy tend to beg important questions. One is that, as presented, they arbitrarily cut off and restrict the range of alternative courses of action [...]. The second is that they inevitably present one with the situation as a going concern, and cut off questions about how the agent got into it, and correspondingly about moral considerations which might flow from that.⁷⁴

To examine Williams' concern, consider the following thought experiment, well known to moral philosophers, and given, in its present form, by Kai Nielsen as an 'exemplary tale' of moral seriousness. Nielsen invokes this story to illustrate his argument against the moral conservatism that informs 'our normal, immediate and rather absolutistic moral reactions'⁷⁵ to

⁷⁴ Williams (1973), *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97

⁷⁵ Kai Nielsen, "Against Moral Conservatism," in Pojman, *op. cit.*, p. 194

situations such as the one presented, and to question the principle that 'the direct intention of the death of an innocent person is never justifiable.'⁷⁶ As Nielsen calls it, *The Case of the Innocent Fat Man*, which concerns a fat man stuck in the mouth of a cave on the coast, proceeds thus:

He was leading a group of people out of the cave when he got stuck in the mouth of the cave and in a very short time high tide will be upon them, and unless he is promptly unstuck, they all will be drowned except the fat man, whose head is out of the cave. But, fortunately, or unfortunately, someone has a stick of dynamite. The short of the matter is, either they use the dynamite and blast the poor innocent fat man out of the mouth of the cave or everyone else drowns. Either one life or many.⁷⁷

Does this scenario beg important questions in the ways identified by Williams? In one sense, it is true that Nielsen's case restricts the range of alternative actions. As presented, it seems that there are only two actions available to the moral agent. However, if it is intended to exemplify a moral dilemma, and thus entails a difficult choice between two ethically repugnant acts, then, arguably, Nielsen's example is of no less illustrative value than Ivan's challenge. If restricting the range of alternative courses of action is a failing, then Ivan's challenge too must be considered inadequate to the task it is intended to fulfil. However, as argued previously, if we use a scenario as a heuristic device to reveal and clarify the implications of a moral theory, then we must respect its content, no matter how apparently restricted the range of options it accommodates. It could further be argued against Williams that, while these examples restrict the range of alternative actions, the very idea of an ethical dilemma entails confrontation with difficult ethical choices between conflicting obligations. To argue that a hypothetical dilemma begs certain questions concerning the nature of dilemma because it restricts the range of alternative actions is, without warrant, to empty the very concept 'dilemma' of substantive content.

A further issue concerns the scenario's plausibility. While the situation in Nielsen's schema may be entirely possible, and be within our

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

ability to make imaginative sense of what we are told about the fat man's predicament, it falls short of being plausible – not implausible because it fails to fulfil Hare's verisimilitude criterion, but because it furnishes too sparse a schema on which to base an informed practical decision. Plausible though the actual entrapment may be, can one really take seriously a hypothetical situation in which one just happens to have a stick of dynamite tucked into one's swimming costume? How is the dynamite to be detonated? Is there a fuse? Is the fuse dry? Are there matches? Are they dry? Is there sufficient explosives expertise to ensure that the passage will be clear after the explosion? Can such an assessment be made even by an expert in the time available? However, if plausibility were a genuine concern here, then Ivan's challenge, with its monstrous and barely imaginable extremes, and almost barren sparseness, is open to the same criticism. Moreover, as argued in the previous chapter, if one has no trouble imagining the world through the eyes of a cockroach or wild wolf, then surely it requires no great leap to imagine oneself trapped in a cave with a fat man blocking the entrance and a stick of dynamite in one's hand. Therefore, provided that we can make imaginative sense of what we are told, and that the issue under investigation is at least basically intelligible in the scenario, then it could be argued that the plausibility of an example's particulars is not so important. By setting aside concern with rigid verisimilitude, we have seen how valuable examining the dilemma exemplified in Ivan's challenge can be in eliciting and testing the implications of certain moral perspectives. Why should Nielsen's case of the innocent fat man be excluded from reflection on this basis?

However, the most pressing concern over the value of schematised examples relates to the second way in which Williams argues that they beg important questions. The argument is that hypothetical examples such as Nielsen's fail to account for too many pertinent aspects of a genuine situation of moral seriousness. Williams wants to ask 'questions about how the agent got into it, and correspondingly about moral considerations

which might flow from that.⁷⁸ A cogent and humane response to the questions raised by this example would require a great deal more information than is presented. It may be that the information that we lack in order to pose Williams' questions may not be vital to the point that Nielsen wants to make about moral conservatism. However, insofar as his intention is to engage his audience's imagination and induce genuine reflection on his argument, the case of the innocent fat man lacks sufficient data to make an informed ethical decision. While, as Harrison argues, 'the sparseness [of such thought experiments] frames, narrows, focuses how we may in various ways attend to the world we have or think we have,'⁷⁹ the very sparseness that endows them with value may also lead to the danger that many schematised examples fail to effectively represent possible aspects of lived experience and collapse into caricature. As a hypothetical case presented to provoke a considered response, Nielsen's tale omits too much information. When placed in the kind of hypothetical predicament described in Nielsen's example and then asked: 'What would you do in such a situation?' it is perfectly intelligible to reply with: 'Well, that depends on...' This reply is intelligible simply because it reflects and is consistent with lived experience. Our responses to being faced with moral situations depend on a complex ensemble of factors that precludes a *simple* choice between two alternatives. A simple thought experiment such as Nielsen's implies a form of disembodied rationality, one which offers a simple response but ignores the nuanced complexity that characterises real-life ethical judgements. We would need to know who the fat man is, and how he is related to us. It is not implausible that we should know these details were we members of the party trapped in the cave. What can such a brief example reveal about the consideration of intimate attachments which are often overlooked or poorly treated in theoretical ethics? It would surely be a far more difficult decision to blow him up if he were our father, for instance, or a spouse, brother, or much loved uncle, rather than a perfect

⁷⁸ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 97t.

⁷⁹ Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 172

stranger. Compare the disembodied rationality embodied in Nielsen's thought experiment to the deeply immersed personal situation represented in *Sophie's Choice*, in which consideration of intimate attachments furnishes the sole criteria for choice. Our decision to act will also be influenced by the identity of the others in the cave. What if one of the trapped is a brother, a spouse, a child? What if all the trapped persons were members of the same family and the fat man was the only stranger among them? How would that lead us to view the fat man's claim on life? What if *they* are all intimately related to the fat man? Moreover, are they to be given the opportunity to contribute to the decision making process? What about the fat man, does he have a say, even if only to take the opportunity to selflessly offer the ultimate sacrifice? Then there is the issue of desert. Different theories treat this issue differently, but in deciding how to act, the agent immersed in his or her deliberative field will want to know more than is given about the character and history of the fat man. Is he an escaped convict, a mass murderer on the run? What if he is a great altruist, and the others in the cave are notorious criminals? What if the fat man is young, say thirty, and the others in the cave are all in their seventies? What if the fat man is the only one in the cave not suffering from AIDS? From the birds-eye view of the situation furnished in this tale, these issues are all relevant considerations in making an ethical judgement.

Arguably, a lack of information here renders the limited range of alternatives to which Williams objects more serious in the case of the innocent fat man than in Ivan's challenge. Ivan's challenge presents a self-contained scenario consisting in two alternatives – it consists in a straight choice between only two available courses of action, and no further information is required for the dilemma to hold. In the case of the innocent fat man, however, there are more alternative courses of action implied in the story, and yet these are omitted from the example. At the very least, because there are several more people in the cave who might be willing to base an ethical decision on the considerations offered, the agent may choose not to participate; or he or she may choose to put it to the vote and allow

democratic process to decide the fate of the fat man and his companions. These options are not available to Alyosha as a would-be torturer. The point here is not that the case of the innocent fat man is without any defences against Williams' criticism that examples such as Nielsen's arbitrarily restrict the range of alternative courses of action; nor is it that open-endedness renders Nielsen's example superior to Ivan's challenge, it does not. Indeed, it attenuates the scenario's authority as an example of a dilemma. The point is that the example omits a range of facts that are crucial to the decision to act in one way or another. This information is relevant if one were to employ the case to elicit, clarify and test the implications of a certain ethical perspective.

Thus, unlike Ivan's challenge, the fat man's plight is presented in a story that does not tend towards its own elucidation. Beyond its value as a snapshot exemplar of an ethical dilemma, Ivan's challenge is presented in the broader context of a novel's story, the elements of which are structured so as to lend intelligibility to Alyosha's decision not to torture the child to death, and his rejection that the people whose happiness turned on the torture would agree to the conditions of Ivan's hypothetical bargain. The argument here is that, because of their brevity and their schematic character, such examples often cannot communicate, at least not as effectively as an extended narrative can, the rich and complex nature of lived experience, nor elicit a useful identification with the characters and their predicament. Consequently, such examples lack the power to arouse the sort of reflective response that they are designed to elicit and, hence, risk provoking an equally schematised result. Nielsen invokes the case to demonstrate the fallibility of certain 'conservative' moral principles, such as 'it is always wrong to kill the innocent.' *To be sure*, one might be tempted say, *one life for many? Of course I'd blow up the fat man*. This is the response that Nielsen's thought experiment is intended to elicit. Faced with the type of dilemma illustrated, the agent is left with no option but to reconsider his or her fealty to certain principles embodied in an ethical perspective. As Nielsen argues, 'If there really is no other way of unsticking our fat man

and if plainly, without blasting him out, everyone in the cave will drown, then, innocent or not, he should be blasted out.'⁸⁰ While he admits that killing the fat man 'is something which is undertaken with the greatest reluctance,'⁸¹ he justifies his conclusion that the fat man must be blown up in terms of the Greatest Happiness Principle: 'if such extreme action is not taken, many lives will be lost and far greater misery will obtain.'⁸² The point here is not that Nielsen's conclusions cannot be sustained; it is that all that can reasonably be gleaned from examining an ethical perspective in light of the case of the innocent fat man is a *prima facie* case against the strict adherence to the principle that it is always wrong to kill innocent persons, with a *ceteris paribus* clause firmly attached – all other things being equal, less unhappiness will result from the death of one man than the death of more. On the information given, it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that a certain principle may not hold in all cases, and that this example may well represent such a case. However, Nielsen's 'exemplary tale' fails to accommodate the psychological and practical complexity of acting on such an ethical judgement.

This is not to say that examples like Nielsen's have no illustrative value; they do, and have often been used with great effect to support and illuminate a number of ethical arguments. Whatever its failings, like Ivan's challenge, the case of the innocent fat man serves as a 'snapshot' of a morally significant situation and is an exemplar of a difficult moral choice. Against his own account of the problematic nature of schematised examples, Williams offers a defence of their use which turns on the role that such examples might play in moral discussion:

These difficulties, however, just have to be accepted, and if anyone finds ... examples ... cripplingly defective in this sort of respect, then he must in his own thought rework them in a richer and less question-begging form.⁸³

⁸⁰ Nielsen, *op. cit.*, p. 197

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Williams, *loc. cit.*

He ascribes value to the role of the imagination in working through the nuances and implications of ethical perspectives and, *pace* Hare, casts doubt on the person who steadfastly refuses to accept that imaginary examples can play such a valuable role:

If he feels that no presentation of any imagined situation can ever be other than misleading in morality, and that there can never be any substitute for the concrete experienced complexity of actual moral situations, then this discussion with him must certainly grind to a halt: but then one may legitimately wonder whether every discussion with him about conduct will not grind to a halt, including any discussion about the actual situations, since discussion about how one would think and feel about situations somewhat different from the actual (that is to say, situations to an extent imaginary) plays an important role in discussion of the actual.⁸⁴

Two points are implicit in Williams' argument. First, imaginary examples can play a role in ethical discourse and make a valuable contribution to reflection on ethical perspectives. Second, even if simple examples are typically too schematised or impoverished, they can be of at least some illustrative or even probative value. Moreover, his suggestion that to render them more valuable to ethical discussion we must 'rework them in a richer and less question-begging form' implies that the richer the example, the more detailed, more finely grained, in short, more reflective of the complexity of lived experience, the more valuable it is to ethical discourse. To agree with Williams' assessment of the value of rich imaginary examples is to agree that generally the richer the example, the more valuable it is to ethical discourse. Ultimately, if we accept these conclusions, then we must accept that the richest form of imaginary example is the most valuable in this regard, even while allowing that excessive richness could be counterproductive. Given these arguments, the form of the most valuable imaginary supplement to ethical discourse is the novel, the *ne plus ultra* of richly detailed, extended, imaginary narratives.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

The Novel's Ascendancy in Morally Relevant Exemplification

This is not to suggest that other forms of fictional narrative cannot both sustain and reward contemplation, while at the same time furnishing material of great value to ethical reflection. Indeed, many examples of ethically relevant and valuable literature exist throughout the history of the corpus, and one must not denigrate the role able to be played by these in ethical reflection. A great number of plays, for instance (Ibsen's *Brand* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* have already been mentioned), possess an often systematically pursued and layered moral content reflection on which may be of undeniable and substantive value to philosophical ethics. The same may be said of many of the Greek - and more contemporary - tragedies, as well as the poetry and dramatic works of writers already mentioned and others such as Marlow, Goethe and Beckett. As such these works, alongside a vast range of attendant critical literature, must not be excluded from possible incorporation into ethical reflection.

But if it is true that one of literature's key virtues is its ability to furnish a richness of detail that is ill-accommodated in traditional forms of ethical reflection, and which presents for contemplation features of the ethical life that are overlooked or receive too little attention in the sparser accounts of morals and morality, then it must also be accepted that the novel does in fact represent the apotheosis of literary supplements to this (narrowly circumscribed) activity. The argument here is that the novel is typically unrestricted in length and detail by the factors that constrain other forms of narrative and, as such, can accommodate a richness unattainable in these other forms, however valuable they might otherwise be. Plays, for instance, are typically constrained not only temporally - by time limits imposed by, among other things, their audiences' spans of attention and their practical timetables - but also by the amount of detail that can be presented in the time (and space) available. It is true that plays may offer glimpses of their characters' deep inner workings, manifest in action and attitude, and communicated via devices such as the soliloquy and the

chorus. But these features, however well executed, are scarcely able to accommodate the finely enmeshed webs of detail possible (at least quantitatively) to be represented in the novel and exemplified not just in Molly Bloom's aforementioned interior monologue in *Ulysses*, but also in the deep psychological insights apprehended in the novels of Gogol, Dostoevsky, James, Tolstoy, Lawrence, Hardy and others. Given the practical constraints imposed on other forms of narrative, it is thus unreasonable (and wholly unrealistic) to expect from drama the vast quantity of detail possible in the novel. Suffice to say, using the texts alone as our sole sources of data for reflection, we can never know as much about the multiplicity of moral facets of Ibsen's Brand as we can about Dostoyevsky's Alyosha Karamazov. To expect otherwise is to commit a category error which ignores a number of relevant distinctions between the literary modes. Thus other forms of literature and narrative (one cannot discount the potential contribution of narratives presented via modes such as pantomime, opera and operetta, marionette performance, and 'new' media such as film, animation, radio, etc), while undeniably valuable, are simply incapable of furnishing the richness of 'factual' data that may be presented in a novel.

Apprehension of the multiplicity of facets of a situation of moral seriousness, as well as its history, is important in making informed ethical judgements. According to Norris:

An important factor in knowing how to act is to have some appreciation and understanding of both the context and history of any situation in which a moral agent has to act. In order to understand a person's decisions we need to get a grasp on as many aspects of their life as we can, for in so doing we gain a deeper appreciation of the factors that are to be taken into account and the weight that should be placed upon them.⁸⁵

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume distinguishes between mistakes of *fact* and those of *right*.⁸⁶ By 'mistake of fact' he means that the agent has

⁸⁵ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 19

⁸⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), III, I, I, p. 460

wrongly perceived the facts of a situation of moral seriousness; by 'mistake of right' he means that the agent has erred in his or her ascription of moral value to an act or situation and has formed an incorrect judgement. In developing his subjectivist account of moral value, he argues that a mistake of right can never be a basic 'source of immorality' because there must be some antecedent fact the perception of which induced the mistaken judgement, and that questions of fact are fundamentally important in forming appropriate moral judgements. He argues that a person's actions may give rise to 'false conclusions in others,' citing the example of a person, 'who thro' a window sees lewd behaviour of mine with my neighbour's wife, may be so simple as to imagine she is certainly my own'⁸⁷ and thus forms the mistaken judgement, the 'mistake of right,' that the behaviour is, at least on the face of it, morally insignificant when in fact it is not. For the reasons given, simple and merely schematic examples contain insufficient data concerning a situation's context and history to ground an informed ethical judgement. A 'good story,' on the other hand, particularly in the form of the novel, furnishes substantially more ethically relevant information than can be communicated in these examples and can, accordingly, help us to address the sorts of questions we need to ask. While a novel may not furnish definitive answers to all the questions raised during the course of the narrative, the elements of its story can at least provide the raw material from which to contemplate a range of intelligible responses. As Graham observes, 'Fiction and poetry put both mind and action equally on view; characters and events can be seen entire.'⁸⁸ He argues that literature puts on view the internal and external aspects of human relationships, and that its power to present for exploration complex images of the social and moral life gives it pre-eminence among the arts:

Novels and poems supply patterns of human relationship, its fulfilment, destruction, or corruption, and these can enter directly into the moral experience of those who are reflection upon how

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 461

⁸⁸ Graham (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 129

best to live, because the devices of art reveal to us the internal 'how it feels' as well as the external 'how it is.'⁸⁹

The reader's answers to ethical questions put to the narrative may transcend the text itself, but searching for and reflecting on these answers are appropriate and valuable aspects of the reading process. Indeed, Peter Kivy argues that they are essential to the reading process.⁹⁰

It may seem obvious to say that a novel can represent lived experience more effectively than a simple schematised example, but the foregoing discussion is directed against the claim that these simple examples are *sufficient* to fully illustrate and test moral positions and make them comprehensive. The contention is that no ethical theory is comprehensive unless it embraces the richness of human experience and the complexity of actual ethical judgements. Linguistic limitations aside, it cannot do this by abstract argument and impersonal discussion alone. Nor, as shown, can simple hypothetical examples alone fill this gap. Philosophical reflection, therefore, needs to be supplemented by something closer to and more sympathetic with a genuine sense of life. In the absence of direct experience, stories provide such a supplement. While the incorporation of many forms of creative literature, as well as other narrative forms including film, into philosophical reflection may be of value, because of its length and range of narrative devices, this task is best suited to the sort of extended, connected narrative of which the novel is the paradigm. As Norris observes:

The novel is able to fill out a life and give us insight into characters and their situation, so that we are able to have an appreciation of the pertinent features to be considered.⁹¹

He argues that many of these features are situationally unique and, as such, do not 'fall within the ambit of some clearly defined principle'⁹² and cannot be accommodated in traditional philosophical discourse. This point also

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, (Cambridge, CUP: 1997), pp. 120ff

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*

applies to schematised examples such as Nielsen's innocent fat man, the brevity and sparseness of which precludes consideration of many important details and thus fails to accommodate the complexity of moral judgements.

In arguing that the novel is an ideal supplement to ethical reflection, Norris writes, 'the novelist ... is able to draw attention to aspects that easily become lost in philosophical prose or which receive too little emphasis.' Norris' point echoes Nussbaum on the value of literature's ability to furnish 'good characters,' although it is free of the normative implications in her suggestion that we ought to live as they do. His position also embraces Cunningham's argument that the fictional lives of literary chapters 'provide us with thick descriptions of ways of life and forms of character, thick enough to do justice to creatures like us.'⁹³ Cunningham maintains that fine works of literature may be treated as 'character portraits that can provide us with the right stuff for concrete, particular deliberation in all its ethical complexity.'⁹⁴ A major claim concerning the novel's value here is expressed by Graham in *Philosophy of the Arts*:

... the novel can be used to create images which oblige us to view our experience in certain ways and thus illuminate aspects of it. It is this possibility, perhaps relatively rarely realised, that allows us to describe imaginative literature as a source of understanding and which entitles us to attribute considerable importance to it.⁹⁵

As Cunningham writes, 'By drawing our attention to morally salient features of life and character, novels can sharpen our ability to perceive moral subtleties and nuances.'⁹⁶ While a range of literary devices may be employed to direct and sustain a reader's attention, the provision of the right stuff for concrete, particular deliberation in all its ethical complexity is essentially a function of character. McGinn argues that for philosophical reflection to more effectively accommodate the complexity of lived

⁹³ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 5

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Graham (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 127

⁹⁶ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 5

experience, we 'need to mingle the general and specific in ways that are not typical of the orthodox ethical treatise.'⁹⁷ He writes:

Above all, questions of *character* assume a far greater prominence when ethics is approached this way, since fictional works are all about the integration between character and conduct. The orthodox focus on moral norms and types of action will be an inadequate tool.⁹⁸

He claims that our ethical knowledge is aesthetically mediated, that 'our moral understanding and the story form seem fitted for one another.'⁹⁹ McGinn believes that this is the way our moral faculty prefers to operate rather than learning principles by rote: 'It is almost effortless to take in a story, pleasant even, though the story may be replete with moral significance.'¹⁰⁰ He argues that fictional narrative, particularly the novel, is the most effective literary form through which to explore ethical concerns because, he says, 'In fiction, character is the *sine qua non*. Character is to fiction what space and time are to physics.'¹⁰¹ Cunningham agrees, and argues that at least part of literature's value to ethical reflection lies in how our engagement with and expectations of literature differ from our approaches to philosophical argument:

We do not expect or want a novel to argue or analyze in the same way as traditional philosophical discourse. Part of the joy in reading a novel is in encountering a depiction of lives and character that invites a different kind of observation and thought. Philosophy, after all, demands great concentration and attention to often tedious details of argument and analysis. Stories, on the other hand, draw us into lives in a far less tedious way, and perhaps this accounts for the great appeal of stories.¹⁰²

According to Cunningham, for ethical enquiry to have value, it must remain true to human life and its complexity. In his discussion of universal ethical duties he argues:

⁹⁷ McGinn, *op. cit.*, p 175

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 174

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 175

¹⁰² Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p 85

... the importance of attending to the details of particular people in particular situations looms far larger than it does when we confine ourselves to judgements about what we can unequivocally demand of just anyone. And other than experiencing things for ourselves, the best way to appreciate the more complex, situated ethical demands is with a detailed story that can paint a big picture of character.¹⁰³

He argues that the 'right' kind of novel for incorporation in ethical reflection is 'one with detailed character portraits of particular people embroiled in complex, meaningful situations.'¹⁰⁴

Sustained attention to the detail of a character's complex life is typical of the *Bildungsroman* of the German literary tradition, and is particularly evident in the 'moral decision' novels of nineteenth century British literature. According to Pascal, the writer of these novels 'was concerned to show characters choosing between certain moral alternatives within an unquestioned socio-moral reality.'¹⁰⁵ Novels in this genre include those by Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Emily Bronte, George Eliot and others. However, many other novels, including a large number of contemporary works, emerge from diverse literary traditions and feature the sustained, detailed and thought-provoking presentations of character that make them valuable in ethical reflection. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* continue to occupy the reflections of moral philosophers. From Africa, the works of Nadine Gordimer, Chinua Achebe, Bessie Head and others deal with characters immersed in situations requiring tough ethical decisions; Narayan's *Bachelor of Arts* explores character development and, as a fairly recent paradigm of the *Bildungsroman*, Hesse's *Siddharta* offers a detailed account of the vicissitudes of life and the values that stem from a variety of decisions and experiences.

Contemporary philosophers who incorporate the study of novels in their ethical reflection include those whose arguments are considered in this investigation. In *The Heart of What Matters*, Cunningham contemplates

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 83

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 84

¹⁰⁵ Roy Pascal, *The German Novel*, (Toronto: University of Toronto press, 1956), p. 3

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and two novels by Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*; and his argument for an emphasis on moral character is embedded in sustained investigation of the moral import of these novel's characters' actions and attitudes. In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum selects James' *The Golden Bowl* to examine the relation between literary form and content; and in *Poetic Justice* she builds her argument against utilitarian justice policy around a detailed discussion of the main characters in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. In *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*, McGinn examines Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Shelley's *Frankenstein* to inform and illustrate his reflections on beauty, moral goodness and evil. Graham refers to a character from Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* to illustrate his argument that an overemphasis on moral duty can lead to an 'unattractive' life, and that the 'appalling picture of rectitude' presented in the character of Lady Linlithgow 'can hardly strike us as the model of the life we ought to lead.'¹⁰⁶ And in his article on the relation between philosophy and literature, Norris employs extracts from Singer's *The Slave* to illustrate significant aspects of the formal distinction between traditional philosophical discourse and the novel, and treats the main character's wrestle with the demands of duty as an illustration of the contrast between a prescription for the 'logical conditions for a moral judgement' contained in traditional ethical perspectives, and 'the psychological realities involved in acting on a moral judgement.'¹⁰⁷

Against this use of literature in ethical reflection it might be argued that, if it is merely a matter of detail, then all that needs to be done to remedy traditional philosophy's 'inadequacy' is to make its theories more detailed, expanding them to accommodate more subtleties and nuances, and thus become more responsive to a greater range of ethical possibilities that speak to the heart of what matters in human life and character. However, the supplemental value of literature in this application cannot be

¹⁰⁶ Graham (1990), *op. cit.* p. 120

¹⁰⁷ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 18

depreciated by shoring up the methods of moral philosophy with the finer points of ethical living. This is not just a question of incorporating more detail into our ethical theories as might be found in the more thorough applied ethics textbooks, or of simply constructing more examples of how ethical principles may be applied. Cunningham argues that while the comprehensive detail contained in these texts are certainly valuable, 'seldom will the details reach into the hearts and minds of the people involved.'¹⁰⁸ While Nielsen's innocent fat man is illuminating to a degree, the fat man's plight remains that of an abstract entity. He and his companions are not presented as particular characters replete with rich inner lives and a real stake in the decision, but as automatons whose fate is to be decided solely by reference to a statistical representation of aggregate happiness. However, as Cunningham points out:

To do justice to particular people and their circumstances, we must paint the kinds of subtle, detailed pictures that can bring them to life in all their complexity, the kinds of pictures good literature can paint.¹⁰⁹

What interests philosophers who contemplate literature in relation to an ethical perspective is not just the descriptive detail of its characters' lives; nor solely how literary language can be employed to elicit the moral significance of narrated events. They are interested in how ethical situations 'play out' *in terms* of the characters' lives, in how their ethical attitudes are informed by their histories, in how their actions are motivated by these attitudes, in what can be gleaned about certain ethical theories from this kind of investigation, and in what these lives can reveal about ethics in general. Just as the novelist can harness the power of emplotment and literary devices such as perspective, metaphor and irony to direct the reader to view a situation in a certain way and to illuminate particular aspects of moral import that receive too little attention in the discourse of traditional philosophical ethics, so too is he or she able to present character

¹⁰⁸ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 84

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

portraits that furnish enhanced data for concrete deliberation in all its ethical complexity.

Moreover, as Graham observes, a distinguishing feature of the extended narrative is that it presents material in a particular order, and that 'an author can construct a story that obliges us to attribute a certain significance to the events related.'¹¹⁰ While we saw earlier how Conrad and Joyce employ language to emphasise important aspects of their stories, it was also shown how, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy structures his story in such a way as to isolate, and thus vivify, the narrative's key incidents. The novel can elicit this compulsion to attribute significance to events in a way that the traditional ethical theories cannot accommodate. For instance, Kant focuses on the agent's will to act according to the categorical imperative and from this a universal judgement is derived. A particular agent's history, and the history of a situation, is morally redundant. A similar point applies to utilitarianism. In utilitarianism, all ethical considerations reduce to the consequences of an action. The complex motives that led to the act are redundant, displaced by concern for its outcome. In neither case is value placed on factors beyond duty or consequences. However, if an important factor in knowing how to act is to have some appreciation and understanding of both the context and history of any situation in which a moral agent has to act, then the extended and detailed narrative contained in novels can furnish a source of this understanding. A central claim of the propositional account is that imaginative literature can supplement philosophical enquiry by illustrating, revealing, elucidating, or reminding us of some ethical fact or possibility with the potential to make a substantive contribution to propositions or arguments in moral philosophy. In this way literature, particularly in the form of the novel, can be used to amplify theoretical conceptions of the good life that may be abstract, schematised or otherwise impoverished. Contemplating novels can facilitate a richer ethical understanding of lived experience than can be conveyed in abstract

argument alone and, as such, help in the development of the capacity to implement worthwhile ethical prescriptions.

¹¹⁰ Graham (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 124

CAN LITERATURE BE PHILOSOPHY?

The Devil whoops, as he whooped of old:
'It's clever, but is it Art?'

*Rudyard Kipling*¹

A novel is an impression, not an argument.
*Thomas Hardy*²

In the preface to *The Moral Life*, an anthology that connects moral philosophy and literature, Pojman argues, 'Good literature...makes the abstract concrete, brings it home to the heart, and forces us to think with innovative imagination.'³ He states his aim in compiling the book, 'I have endeavoured to join forces, to unite literature and philosophy in the service of ethical understanding.'⁴ Here, Pojman concurs with the thrust of the account of the role for literature in moral philosophy examined in previous chapters. However, implicit in the notion of 'unification' is a distinction between the two enterprises. Before there can be a unification, there must first exist distinct items. In line with the arguments examined earlier, Pojman does not propose literature as a substitute for systematic ethical

¹ Rudyard Kipling, *The Conundrum of the Workshops* (1892)

² Thomas Hardy, *op. cit.*, p. 463

³ Pojman (2000), *op. cit.*, p. xiii

reflection but regards it as a supplement to philosophical thought. In so doing, he preserves the role for traditional philosophical reflection, even when it is augmented by imaginative literature:

One needs cool-headed philosophical analysis to play a sturdy role in sorting out the ambiguities and ambivalences in literature, to abstract from particulars and universalize principles, to generate wide-ranging intellectual theories.⁵

He echoes Kant when he writes, 'the passionate imagination of literature is blind without the cool head of philosophy, but the cool head of philosophy is sterile and as frigid as an iceberg without the passions of life, conveyed in literature.'⁶ It has already been argued that an alliance between literature and philosophy can refine our understanding of ethical issues, and that the novel provides the most effective supplement in this regard. But precisely where are the boundaries in this alliance between the cool head of philosophy and the passionate imagination of literature, and how can the distinction between them be best exploited?

The Four Possibilities

As previously noted, in 'Can Literature be Moral Philosophy?'⁷ Raphael examines four possible meanings of the thesis that there is a positive connection between literature and moral philosophy. He expresses these in the form of four propositions: first, a work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature; second, a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy; third, moral philosophy can feed literature; and, fourth, literature can feed moral philosophy. Although to an extent they coincide, I shall examine them one by one. But because Raphael's second proposition is, by his estimate, the most crucial and, as will be shown, the most controversial, and because the outcomes of investigations into the other three will have serious implications for its validity, I will examine it last.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. xiv

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

The First Proposition: Moral Philosophy as Literature

On the first proposition, that a work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature, it was noted in chapter one that it is generally accepted that a number of works of philosophy possess literary merit without compromising their status as works of 'serious' philosophy. However, it was also noted that two important questions need to be addressed in relation to this proposition. First, by reference to what criteria may we ascribe literary merit? Second, does the mere fact that a work of philosophy possesses literary merit qualify it as a work of literature? Any response to this second question will need a viable definition of literature, one which either allows or excludes certain forms of discourse, including philosophical prose. If it is true, as I argue, that the significance to ethical reflection of the connection between literature and philosophy lies in the *distinction* between the two enterprises, then answers to these questions have a crucial bearing on how to account for the value of this relation, especially in light of Raphael's second proposition. For this reason, and because the conclusions from this examination and that of the third proposition will ground a critique of the second proposition, the first proposition warrants sustained critical attention here.

What might it mean to say that a work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature? Raphael himself offers two versions and, although they seem to have different meanings, he treats them interchangeably. He presents the first version thus: 'A work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature.'⁸ This is familiar as his 'first proposition' for the connection between philosophy and literature. Later in his article he presents the supposedly same idea in a different form. He opens his discussion of this first proposition by writing: 'The first [proposition] is straightforward enough. It is evident that a book which is primarily a work of philosophy (not only but including moral philosophy) can also have merit as a work of literature.' Thus it is apparent that, although Raphael

⁷ Raphael, *loc. cit.*

⁸ Raphael (1983-1984), p. 1

does not explicitly acknowledge it, two distinct propositions seem to be involved. While the first asserts an identity between philosophy and literature (philosophy *as* literature), in specific cases, the second seems to assert a similarity or merit relation (philosophy as having literary merit, philosophy as being *like* literature), in specific cases.

That a work of moral philosophy can also have merit as a work of literature implies that a work of moral philosophy ('philosophy' insofar as it contains a rational argument that supports some philosophical conclusion, or constitutes an exposition of a philosophical position) has qualities that qualify it as 'literary,' or as having 'literary merit.' I presume here that to predicate a work with literariness is to say that it possesses some *artistic* merit, as opposed to the trivial meaning, merely that it appears in a body of writing – 'the literature' – on a particular subject. Thus, to argue that a work of philosophy has merit as a work of literature may be to argue that a work of philosophy uses certain stylistic devices to illustrate an argument, to emphasise or clarify a point, to capture the reader's attention, and so on. Or else it may mean that the argument itself is presented in a generally 'literary' style, perhaps written in aesthetically appealing, non-technical language that somehow qualifies the work as having literary merit. It does not mean that all or even a substantial part of a work of philosophy is solely a product of the writer's creative imagination, or that the appeal to reason that characterises philosophical argument has been supplanted by a concern for aesthetic appeal. Nor does it mean that the work is intended as a fictional representation of some state of affairs, or that it is meant to be adjudged principally on its artistic merit. The ascription of literariness, or literary merit, to a work of philosophy is therefore principally a question of style. Given its particular subject matter, its 'reflective generality and a style of argument that claims to be rationally persuasive,'⁹ all of which qualifies it as distinctly philosophical, a work of philosophy, even if unadorned with other stylistic devices common to works of imaginative literature, can thus

qualify as literary by reference to its language and the style in which its argument is presented. This position has no negative implications for arguments concerning the unity of form and content as, while style and substance are indivisible, they may be analysed and assessed separately.

In *English Philosophers and Schools of Philosophy*, James Seth is adamant that the writing style of many English language philosophers qualifies their work as distinctly literary. He writes: 'English philosophy is entitled to be called literature in a sense in which the philosophy of perhaps no other nation has the same right to the name.'¹⁰ He argues that the works of a number of prominent philosophers qualify as possessing literary merit, and that they feature among the most highly regarded of non-fiction literature:

Whether we think of Bacon and Hobbes in the seventeenth century, of Berkeley and Hume in the eighteenth, or of Coleridge and Ferrier in the nineteenth, we cannot but recognise qualities of style which entitle the writer to rank among the masters of English prose of the expository and controversial type with the best essayists of our country.¹¹

Seth holds that literary merit is a product of the choice of language employed by the writer. He contrasts philosophical works that possess literary merit with those that are written in a technical style which disqualifies them from artistic consideration:

Even if we take a philosopher of lower literary merit, like Locke or Reid, we find that in comparison with the philosophers of the Continent, and especially of Germany, the style is characterised by the absence of severity and technicality; and while this may lead to a certain loss of precision which causes difficulty in the interpretation of the philosophy, the fact that the works are written in the vernacular adds to their literary value.¹²

For Seth, the choice of style is at least partly informed by the writer's background, culture or profession:

⁹ Bernard Williams (1985), *op. cit.*, p. 2

¹⁰ James Seth, *English Philosophers and Schools of Philosophy*, (London: J. M. Dent and Son, 1912), p. 1

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

The untechnical, as well as the literary, quality of the style of English philosophy is doubtless in some measure due to the fact that its chief representatives were not, like the great German idealists, university professors, but men of affairs, in close contact with the life of the nation.¹³

While Seth enumerates more substantive differences between English and Continental philosophy, these concern subject matter rather than method and style and, as such, they do not concern us here. However, it must be acknowledged that the divide between 'technical' and 'literary' styles of philosophy is not necessarily as geographical or culturally determinate as Seth contends. Indeed, Frederick Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard are both continental philosophers ('continental' in the sense that Seth uses the term) many of whose philosophical works are of a distinctly, and intentionally, literary style. While not all of their works qualify as explicit works of moral philosophy, many of their works contain or constitute distinct moral arguments or positions that assure their status as such works. Yet throughout their respective corpora, both writers employ many stylistic devices to fortify, clarify, and emphasise their arguments. Fiction, allusion, allegory, irony, and metaphor are devices common to their works. Moreover, Nietzsche's academic vocation seems not to have affected the literary quality of his writings; and Kierkegaard, his life remote from that of a university professor, was himself a man of affairs whose writings contributed substantially to the cultural life of nineteenth century Copenhagen.

Seth's criterion for literary quality is stylistic rather than substantive. If a work of philosophy is written in a manner warranting appreciation as 'literary' as opposed to 'technical,' but which still relies on explicit argument for its rational force, then it qualifies as a work of literature while retaining its status as a work of philosophy. Thus it qualifies as 'literature' only insofar as it is 'literary' - that is, it possesses literary merit in virtue of the style in which it is written. Here, the claim that a work of moral philosophy can also have merit as a work of literature is uncontroversial.

¹³ *ibid.*

Just as some works of imaginative literature are thought to be deeply philosophical (insofar as they delve into the traditional subject matter of philosophy or, more particularly, of philosophical ethics) without qualifying as genuine works of philosophy (insofar as they do not constitute rationally persuasive arguments), so can it be argued that, given a certain style, works of 'pure' philosophy may be thought of as literary. Further, if a philosophical work's literariness contributes to its ability to arrest its reader's attention, and thereby sustain reflective engagement, then literary merit can be said to contribute value.

But suggesting that a work of philosophy has literary merit, or even making the stronger claim that a work of philosophy can have merit *as* a work of literature, is not the same as arguing that a work of moral philosophy can *be* a work of literature; that is, that it possesses sufficient of the properties common to works of literature to qualify as a work of literature in its own right while at the same time retaining the features that qualify it as a work of philosophy, and that its merit as a work of literature be adjudged against distinctly literary criteria that, despite some areas of overlap, are clearly different from the criteria against which a work of philosophy is evaluated.¹⁴ This latter meaning, however, is implied in the first sense of Raphael's proposition that a work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature.

In his argument for the occurrence of this identity between moral philosophy and literature, Raphael nominates Plato's *Phaedo* as a paradigmatic example of a distinctive work of philosophy that not only possesses literary merit, but also qualifies *as* a work of literature *per se*. That is, Plato's dialogue qualifies as an example of the first meaning of the proposition that a work of moral philosophy can also be a work of literature; that it can be both without compromising its status as either.

¹⁴ See chapter two of this thesis for an enumeration of the criteria against which works of philosophy are generally evaluated. See also the later discussion in this chapter for how these criteria cannot be applied to works of literature.

According to Raphael, the *Phaedo* is 'clearly a work of philosophy, seeking to prove by rational argument the immortality of the soul.'¹⁵ But he claims that it is also a work of literature in the non-trivial sense: 'the book depicts the character of Socrates and its effects on his friends with a dramatic intensity that could scarcely be bettered by any poet.'¹⁶ For Raphael, then, the depiction of character coupled with 'dramatic intensity' endows the *Phaedo* with a poetic quality that qualifies it as a work of literature, without compromising its status as a work of serious philosophy. Raphael cites Sir Richard Livingstone's translation of Plato's *Apology*, *Crito* and the *Phaedo*¹⁷ as an indication of the *Phaedo*'s acceptance as a literary work. He writes that Livingstone presented the more 'strictly philosophical' arguments of the dialogue in smaller type so that, according to Livingstone, 'they can be either read or omitted.'¹⁸ Livingstone thought that the more literary aspects of the dialogue accounted for their 'immortal' value and, says Raphael, 'evidently Plato's own arguments for immortality did not, in Livingstone's eyes, contribute to the immortality of the *Phaedo*.'¹⁹ However, Livingstone's assessment of the literary interest of Plato's argument has no bearing on its philosophical merit. Insofar as Socrates' argument for the immortality of the soul constitutes a significant thread connecting the entire narrative, and helping to make intelligible its more dramatic elements, the *Phaedo* remains unequivocally a work of philosophy. But this fact does not disqualify it from literary evaluation; indeed, in his introduction to *The Last Days of Socrates*, Harold Tarrant argues that, with very few exceptions, most of Plato's works, including the *Phaedo*, 'are fully philosophy and fully literature.'²⁰ Can a text be fully both? What features are required for a work of philosophy to qualify also as fully a work of literature?

¹⁵ Raphael (1983-1984), *op. cit.*, p. 2

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ published together under the title *Portrait of Socrates* (Oxford, 1938)

¹⁸ Raphael, *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* pp. 2-3

²⁰ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993), p. ix.

In assessing the ascription to the *Phaedo* of both philosophical and literary status, Raphael first examines Plato's aim in writing the dialogue. He notes that it was certainly not literary, 'if indeed there is such a thing as a bare literary aim.'²¹ He asks whether Plato's intention was to articulate a philosophical argument for the immortality of the soul or to elicit the reader's admiration for the character of Socrates, and concludes that it is both. Plato's dialogue is thus intended to constitute not just a philosophical argument to support a certain metaphysical position, but also a character portrait which illuminates certain traits that Plato considers desirable, and which readers, having been shown the example of Socrates, will endeavour to cultivate in themselves. According to Raphael, while the fulfilment of the first aim requires a compelling and explicit philosophical argument, 'the second of these two aims requires literary art if it is to succeed.'²² Raphael writes of this second aim that, in itself, 'it is a didactic aim, to instill in readers an appreciation of the moral virtues of Socrates' character and a desire for self-improvement in emulation of him.'²³ The possession of the stylistic elements required to fulfil this second aim qualifies the *Phaedo* as support for a virtue ethic as discussed earlier. Just as Hugo's good bishop of Digne exemplifies the saintly character and embodies the virtues of benevolence and generosity of spirit, so in the *Phaedo* a virtuous character faces death with a noble, philosophic comportment deemed by Plato worthy of emulation. Thus the *Phaedo* has a philosophical aim, embodied in the metaphysical argument for the immortality of the soul, and a didactic, moral aim, to show the noble manner in which a philosopher faces death. But even if this is its didactic aim, and this aim is to be fulfilled via literary means, for Raphael's first proposition for the connection between literature and philosophy to hold, it remains to be shown that the *Phaedo* is both literature and *moral* philosophy. If it is to be both, it must be shown to be at least each.

²¹ Raphael, *loc. cit.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

So, is the *Phaedo* a work of moral philosophy? In evaluating the joint aims of the *Phaedo*, Raphael cites A. J. Ayer's distinction between a moralist and a moral philosopher, wherein the former seeks merely to promote a particular ethic and the latter's activities constitute a 'systematic endeavour to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles.'²⁴ In short, the moral philosopher seeks to construct an account of morals and moral principles that not only offers a cogent explanation of the concepts it entails, but also furnishes *reasons* for accepting his or her claim that they are compelling, or that they possess a normative content, or that they are consistent with the accepted aims of moral philosophy and philosophy in general. The moralist, however, offers no such justification for his or her injunctions. Rather, the moralist in the sense intended here (and employed by Ayer and Raphael), as a person given to moralizing, seeks simply to inculcate in the recipients of his or her 'wisdom' a preferred set of principles that guides actions or ways of life, without the benefit of explanation, reason or normative justification. With this distinction in mind, Raphael questions whether the *Phaedo*'s second aim is moralism instead of moral philosophy. Is Plato's account of Socrates' approach to death an exercise in moralism insofar as it seeks merely to present the Socratic character as worthy of unreflective emulation rather than a systematic philosophical reflection on the nature of Socratic virtue? Raphael asks whether Plato himself would accept this and, in responding on Plato's behalf, argues:

He would agree that one can be a moralist without being a moral philosopher, but he would not agree that one can be an adequate moral philosopher without being a moralist.²⁵

Raphael offers no justification of this claim. However, it is not unreasonable to allow the qualification given that the prescription of certain actions, forms of character and ways of life is an essential feature of first order

²⁴ Pojman (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 1

²⁵ Raphael, *loc. cit.*

moral philosophy, and that these prescriptions require systematic reflection on the grounds on which they are justified. Thus for the moral philosopher, moralising – the communication of ethical prescriptions with the intention of convincing others to comply with them – is legitimate activity, but it constitutes only *part* of his or her activities. Even then the philosophical method requires that the prescriptions communicated be questioned, analysed, and refined. For the pure moralist, on the other hand, in Raphael's sense of the term, issuing prescriptions for conduct with the expectation of unreflective conformity constitutes the *entirety* of his or her moral activities. For Plato, however, there is sufficient evidence throughout the Socratic dialogues that no expectation of unreflective conformity is held by Socrates. The objective of the dialectic method he employs is not intended to elicit unreflective subservience to a moral ideal, as would be the aim of the mere moralist, but to provoke a considered response to the kinds of philosophical questions inherent in the situations of ethical significance he raises for discussion. The moralising in the Socratic dialogues is not the advocacy of dogmatic adherence to uncritically accepted principles, but a moralism tempered by reason; and is thus legitimately the activity of a moral philosopher.

However, Raphael suggests that, even allowing this, given that the prescriptions are only implied in the depiction of Socrates' attitude towards death, and do not constitute an express argument, 'you may still question whether the moralism of the *Phaedo* is part of an enterprise in moral philosophy.'²⁶ He asks whether the moralising implied in the depiction of Socrates' demeanour relates directly to the more distinctly philosophical aspects of the work: 'the philosophical arguments of the dialogue are concerned with the immortality of the soul, a topic for metaphysics rather than moral philosophy.'²⁷ Insofar as the *Phaedo* constitutes a case in point, Raphael's question raises an important issue for the relation between literature and moral philosophy; especially given that the dialogue is

²⁶ Raphael, *loc. cit.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

treated by Raphael as a paradigm of *moral* philosophy as literature. Certainly the *Phaedo* is a work of *philosophy*: Socrates' metaphysical arguments for immortality are clearly presented, objections enumerated, and replies clarified. But it also has clear moral relevance. Our acceptance or rejection of metaphysical arguments concerning the soul's immortality has a profound bearing on how to behave, especially if conduct in 'this' life influences the quality of the next. In one sense, then, insofar as moral implications flow from its metaphysical conclusions, the *Phaedo* is at least implicitly a work of moral philosophy. But does accepting this argument require accepting that all works of metaphysics also qualify as implied works of moral philosophy? Raphael himself observes, 'we all know that the different branches of philosophy run into one another.'²⁸ Moreover, for Raphael, the *Phaedo's* moralism (whether or not it is a product of an underlying moral philosophy) is implied in the literary fabric of the text rather than expressed in argument form, as are its metaphysics.

But does the mere fact that moral implications flow from its metaphysical conclusions render it specifically a work of moral philosophy? Or does the fact that its moral reasoning is only implied disqualify it as a work of moral philosophy? An affirmative answer to the first question would require a revision of the criteria that delineate areas in philosophy. However, this revision is clearly unwarranted by Raphael's argument. Post-modern boundary-blurring aside, the activities of the various branches of philosophy, while they often overlap and have implications for each other, are largely defined by their specific subject matters and objectives. A metaphysical argument for the indestructibility of the soul may have ethical implications, and if valid, these must be accommodated in an adequate ethical theory; but this does not qualify the argument as explicitly moral in its own right. An affirmative answer to the latter question has serious implications for the acceptability of the claim that the *Phaedo* is a paradigm of a work that is both moral philosophy and

²⁸ *ibid.*

literature, as there is nothing controversial in the suggestion that a work of literature can also be a work of moralism.

Two responses may be made to these questions. The first, not considered by Raphael, is that the *Phaedo* contains some expressly expository moral philosophy separate from its pure metaphysical arguments, that distinguishes it from merely moralising. If this is true, then the *Phaedo* is a work of philosophy which also qualifies, at least in part, as a work of *moral* philosophy, just as we regard Hume's *Treatise* as a work of philosophy which, given Book III, is, at least partly, also a work of moral philosophy. This is my position. Raphael's position, however, is embodied in the second response. He argues that while the *Phaedo* is not explicitly a work of moral philosophy, it nevertheless qualifies as such because the moralism it contains derives from a philosophical purpose that is woven into its literary form.

Taking the first response, features of an explicit moral philosophy are evident in 82a-b of the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates discusses the value of the virtues with Cebes, arguing that the more virtuous our conduct in corporeal life, the more desirable will be the lives of our souls after death:

I suppose that the happiest people, and those who reach the best destination, are the ones who have cultivated the goodness of an ordinary citizen, so-called 'temperance' and 'justice,' which is acquired by habit and practice, without the help of philosophy and reason.²⁹

Socrates' account of the virtues here implies a criticism of unreflective moralism, for the cultivation of virtues by 'habit and practice' is not the product of serious reflection, and even the happiest people will not reach the destination reserved for those who have actively reflected on their ethical lives. For Socrates, the most desirable afterlife is awarded only to those reflective souls whose moral conduct is grounded in reason and learning: 'But no soul which has not practised philosophy, and is not

²⁹ Plato, *op. cit.*, p. 141

absolutely poor when it leaves the body, may attain to the divine nature; that is only for the lover of learning.’³⁰

A more sustained and clearly philosophical discussion of the virtues occurs in 68b-69d. Here Socrates takes up a theme introduced in the *Meno*, concerning the distinction between popular and Socratic morality, between ‘ordinary’ virtue and the virtue of the philosopher. The section begins with Socrates contrasting the fear with which ordinary persons face death and the manner in which a philosopher approaches the afterlife. He contends that ordinary persons fear corporeal death because they are lovers of the body and bodily pleasures, and that these will be unavailable in the afterlife. The philosopher, on the other hand, is the lover of wisdom and regards the body as an impediment to the attainment of knowledge. He argues that, of all persons, the prospect of death is least alarming to the philosopher:

...will a true lover of wisdom who has firmly grasped this same conviction – that he will never attain wisdom worthy of the name elsewhere than in the next world – will he be grieved at dying? Will he not be glad to make that journey? We must suppose so, my comrade; that is, if he is a genuine “philosopher;” because then he will be of the firm belief that he will never find wisdom in all its purity in any other place.³¹

Thus the philosopher, whose ultimate aim is to achieve wisdom, and who believes that wisdom is only attainable after corporeal death, would be unreasonable to fear death. Socrates’ position here can be seen as the conclusion of a compelling argument, one that he makes explicit:

The philosopher will only be truly happy when he or she finds pure wisdom;

Pure wisdom can only be found after bodily death;

Therefore, rather than fear death, the philosopher will take delight in its prospect.

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 141-142

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 121

Socrates then analyses the virtues of courage and temperance, arguing that they are illogical when, if understood in the ordinary sense, applied to persons other than philosophers. He argues that when an ordinary courageous person faces death, unlike the philosopher, 'he does so through fear of something worse.'³² This is illogical, according to Socrates, because it makes no sense to suppose that courage is due to fear and dread, 'that fear and cowardice should make a man brave.'³³ He makes a similar point against those who value temperance as a virtue in the ordinary sense: 'Is it not, in just the same way, a sort of self-indulgence that makes them temperate?' He argues that those who practice temperance ordinarily do so for reasons that are inconsistent with true nature of the virtue: 'We may say that this is impossible, but all the same those who practise this simple form of temperance ... are afraid of losing other pleasures which they desire, so they refrain from one kind because they cannot resist the other.'³⁴ This comports with the popular aphorism 'You have to have *some* vices' and, on this account, a person who exercises temperance by refraining from gluttony so as to allow themselves a higher level of alcohol consumption is not temperate at all, in any meaningful sense. Indeed, the suggestion that temperance is manifest here strikes Socrates as having '...nothing sound or honest about it.'³⁵ Although he employs these arguments as defences against Cebes' and Simmias' challenge that it is unnatural for him to face death without grief or bitterness, they support his more general ethical position that prescribing virtue in isolation from wisdom is merely moralising and, as such, prey to illusions of virtue: 'The real thing, whether self-control or justice or courage, is in fact a kind of purification from all this kind of motivation, and wisdom itself is a sort of cleansing agent.'³⁶

Moreover, while these arguments occur in the general context of his metaphysical arguments for the immortality of the soul, they espouse a

³² *ibid.*, p. 122

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 123

distinct position on the *nature* of the afterlife and its relation to the here and now, and, as such, do not directly contribute to Socrates' attempts to prove the immortality of the soul. Rather, in asserting that the desirability of one's afterlife depends on how one comports oneself in the material world, Socrates presupposes the soul's immortality and makes a distinctly ethical point. This feature of Socrates' argument is analogous to the arguments Kierkegaard advances for the mortal agent to cultivate a relation with the eternal (God) in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*. In these works, Kierkegaard does not intend to prove the existence of God and His particular nature; rather, he presupposes His existence and nature, proposing that one must, unlike the aesthete who operates at a visceral level, consciously choose to choose between good and evil and, as such, buy into the ethical life as a stage on the way to one's ultimate relation, that with the eternal.³⁷ While his argument clearly assumes a metaphysical fact, it does not constitute a metaphysical argument but an ethical one insofar as it examines and prescribes a certain form of character or way of life. Moreover, like those of Judge William and William Afham in Kierkegaard's works, Socrates' arguments are expressed in the dialogue and are not merely implied in its literary fabric; and they espouse a clear and specifically ethical position. The moralising entailed here rests on explicit reasoned argument and is, thus, clearly an exercise in moral philosophy.³⁸

Raphael offers a different perspective on the position that the *Phaedo*, constitutes, at least in part, a work of moral philosophy and gives different reasons why it should be accepted as such. He argues that the work is a 'reformed version of tragic drama'³⁹ which accommodates and overcomes

³⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*, in Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1946), *passim*.

³⁸ It must be acknowledged that as Plato is thought to express his own ethical position, to a certain extent, through his depiction of Socrates, so Kierkegaard chose to express much of his philosophical thoughts pseudonymously. However, as the precise aims of each writer's choice of narrative mode and point of view are unavailable except by speculation, and do not largely affect my own arguments, I shall leave aside questions concerning the provenance of ideas expressed in their works.

³⁹ Raphael, *op. cit.*, p. 4

Plato's criticism of the poets in the *Republic*. Raphael writes, 'In the *Republic*, Plato talks of a long-standing quarrel or rivalry between poetry and philosophy; he means a rivalry for the role of moral educator.'⁴⁰ Indeed, in books II, III and X of the *Republic*, Socrates' argument that poetry ought to be banished from his ideal society on the implied grounds that didactic poetry is the product of mere moralising is wholly consistent with the arguments in the *Phaedo* against the inculcation of virtue via means other than active reflection, 'in isolation from wisdom.'⁴¹ As Raphael notes, 'the central point of that criticism [in the *Republic*] is an attack on the tragic drama, especially for inducing pity and for allowing us to fear death and its aftermath.'⁴² Raphael argues that while the *Phaedo* is clearly a type of tragedy, it differs from other tragedies in the manner in which its hero is depicted as dying. Raphael's critique relies on *Phaedo*'s early account of the manner of Socrates' death:

He says that Socrates died so fearlessly and with such confidence that "he appeared blessed ... and about to be happy, if any man ever was," in the next world. And therefore, adds *Phaedo* (twice, to make sure that we have taken the point), "I did not pity him" as one might otherwise have expected; instead there was a strange mixture of pleasure and pain.⁴³

But does the fact that Socrates' death is presented in a manner held by Plato to be virtuous, qualify it as specifically a work of moral philosophy? Raphael believes that it does, and argues that the pedagogic aspect of the narrative depends on a form of reasoning implied in the actions of the hero rather than expressed directly in explicit arguments. He argues that, in presenting the character of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, Plato 'is trying to take the place of tragic drama.'⁴⁴ According to Raphael, Plato 'presupposes that the tragic drama of the previous century performed the function which he was now taking over. The function certainly included moral education, but I

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Plato, *loc. cit.*

⁴² Raphael, *loc. cit.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

think it can be called moral philosophy.⁴⁵ For Raphael, the *Phaedo*'s status as a work of moral philosophy is at least partly due to its historical context: 'Tragic drama was the moral philosophy of fifth-century Athens.'⁴⁶

Undoubtedly, moral education is part of the *Phaedo*'s aim. But this observation of itself fails to distinguish between moral philosophy and mere moralising. Throughout the ages a great deal of poetry, drama and literature in general, including stories, myths and fables, both religious and secular, has aimed at moral education. For example, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* has moral education as its clear aim and constitutes an undisguised work of literary moralism. Indeed it was commissioned as such by Spenser's patron, Elizabeth I. But few would accept that, because it depicts its tragic hero in a mode that differs from more common representations of virtuous action, it qualifies as a work of moral philosophy. If, as Raphael claims, one can be a moralist without being a moral philosopher, but cannot be an adequate moral philosopher without also being a moralist, then a poem like Spenser's can count as a work of moralism without qualifying as a work of moral philosophy. Similarly, on Raphael's account, the *Phaedo* has a didactic function that certainly qualifies it as a work of moralism. But what features, for Raphael, qualify it also as distinctly a work of moral philosophy? First, he writes, 'the ethical dimension of Attic tragedy was not simply the preaching of moral doctrine; that would be moralizing pure and simple.'⁴⁷ But neither does he mean that the moral prescriptions are presented as the conclusions to a carefully structured and explicit moral argument. Rather, he argues, in tragic narratives like the *Phaedo*, moral doctrine is presented 'as the outcome of a new perspective, in a form of persuasion that can fairly be called rational although not reducible to rules of inference like logic.'⁴⁸

However, as shown, Socrates' perspective on death, whether or not one agrees with his reasoning, is presented as the conclusion to a carefully

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

structured argument, and the bulk of this argument is explicit in the text. The form of persuasion Plato employs in the *Phaedo* is both rational and reducible to chains of inference. Indeed, to excise the more explicitly philosophical aspects of Socrates' approach to death from the text, would leave merely an image of his manner of dying, one which clearly embodies Plato's didactic aim of presenting his death as an ideal of how to approach mortality, but without the rational support furnished by philosophical argument. Such excision may not compromise the narrative's literary quality, but without the rational support given by explicit argument, it would render the prescriptions implied in the perspective furnished by Socrates' attitude to death into mere moralising. Contrariwise, removing the dramatic features of the narrative, leaving only the arguments (both moral and metaphysical) in bare propositional form, would not compromise their status as serious philosophy. Thus, regarding the *Phaedo* as firstly a work of philosophy puts Plato's choice of form in a different light: the dramatic mode works both as moralising and as moral philosophy.

So while the *Phaedo* is clearly an exercise in moralising, it is also a work of moral philosophy. But, as argued, it is not specifically a work of philosophy for the reasons outlined by Raphael. This is an important point, with serious implications for his second, most controversial proposition: that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy. However, as noted earlier, for the first proposition that a work of moral philosophy can also be fully a work of literature to hold, it must be shown to be at least each. As argued, the *Phaedo* can reasonably be regarded as a work of moral philosophy, although not for the reasons given by Raphael, but how does this bear on its status as a work of literature? In 61b, Socrates himself distinguishes between the versifier of 'stories' and the writer of 'discourse,' claiming that he is no story-writer. Is this indicative of Plato's desire that the dialogue be regarded in a certain fashion, as philosophy rather than literature? To paraphrase Kipling's devil, the arguments in the *Phaedo* render it clever, but is it art?

Raphael's assessment of the *Phaedo*'s literary quality turns on its dramatic intensity. For him, the entire narrative is characterised by its dramatic quality: the narrative itself is 'literally dramatic. It has the form of a Greek drama.'⁴⁹ Raphael also observes that the dialogue follows the method of presentation employed by dramatists and comments that drama in ancient Greece 'depended almost entirely on what was said.'⁵⁰ He suggests that Plato derived the dialogue form as much from the practice of drama as from Socrates' own practice of dialectic. Raphael argues that, like Greek drama, the work is broken into episodes, each of which is 'interrupted by pauses of a less weighty character'⁵¹ in which focus shifts from the dialogue's predominant subject matter and, at two critical points, by a commentary from a small group separate from the 'main cast.' This little group, says Raphael, is analogous to the chorus used in Greek drama 'to express the feelings of the wider "audience" of the work.'⁵² Still more significant, argues Raphael:

is an indication that the drama is a kind of tragedy. The hero dies, nobly, having excited our imagination; but early on, in the introductory discussion of the "chorus," the narrator Phaedo, who had been present at the events he is going to describe, distinguishes the death of Socrates from other tragedies.⁵³

His earlier claim that Attic tragedy has an ethical dimension that transcends mere moralising, and his contention that the *Phaedo* can be regarded, to a certain degree, as analogous to Attic tragedy, at least in its literary form, is consistent with Atticism's distinguishing features: its simplicity, directness and lack of rhetorical device.⁵⁴

But the *Phaedo*'s status as a work of literature is due to more than its mere resemblance to a certain form of Greek drama. While it does embody the dramatic elements which characterise Attic tragedy, it also employs a

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*, pp. 3-4

number of devices common to literature in general and which qualify it as a work of literature *per se*. First, the *Phaedo* qualifies as a work of *narrative* art in the most fundamental construal of the term 'narrative.' While the *Phaedo* does contain dialogue, it is a narrative, and its dramatic tension is due to more than its presentation of interlocution. Insofar as the *Phaedo* recounts the story of Socrates' death, with characters, scenes, settings and actions, and that this story is told by a narrator, Phaedo, the work qualifies as a narrative by the criteria identified earlier: there is a story, and this story is told by a story-teller, the narrator. These features also distinguish it from a work of pure drama as, write Scholes and Kellogg, 'a drama is a story without a story-teller; characters act out directly what Aristotle called an "imitation" of such action as we find in life.'⁵⁵ Raphael considers the narrative's tragic intensity to be its defining quality as a work of literature. But its tragic tone is embodied in the speech, actions and attitudes of a cast of characters; and dramatic characterisation, as argued previously, is a function of literature. Language, too, plays a role here. The language used by the characters is simple and direct, and, even when complex metaphysics are discussed, is free of the technicalities that, according to Seth, detract from a work's literary merit. The insider's perspective that characterises literature also features in the narrative. Socrates' attitude to death, his manner of dying, and even his moral and metaphysical arguments are all conveyed via the viewpoint of the narrator; and we are given some access to Phaedo's own feelings on the matter. As he describes his feelings to Echecrates, 'I experienced a quite weird sensation, a sort of curious blend of pleasure and pain combined, as my mind took it in that in a little while my friend was going to die.'⁵⁶

Moreover, the *Phaedo* is not entirely free of stylistic devices that characterise modern literature. The description of his death and the

⁵⁴ Cuddon, *op. cit.*, p. 65

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Plato, *op. cit.*, 59a, p. 110

ordinariness of Socrates' last words, as well as his friend Crito's calm reply, lend a tragic dignity to his situation:

The coldness was spreading about as far as his waist when Socrates uncovered his face – for he had covered it up – and said (they were his last words): 'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it and don't forget.'
'No, it shall be done,' said Crito. 'Are you sure there is nothing else?'⁵⁷

The scene's pathos is heightened by the quiet manner of Socrates' passing:

Socrates made no reply to this question, but after a little while he stirred; and when the man uncovered him, his eyes were fixed. When Crito saw this, he closed his eyes and mouth.⁵⁸

This scene demonstrates three further specifically literary features which help to qualify the *Phaedo* as a work of literature: imagination, fiction and symbolism. The imaginative element is present in the way in which Socrates dies, and the very manner of his dying is symbolic of the attitude to death that he espouses throughout the narrative. As Socrates' soul departs his body, it commences the journey towards achieving everything he sought throughout his life - dying is merely a further step along the path to pure wisdom. As Tarrant describes it, 'At the end of the work we meet an excellent illustration of the slightness of this step as Socrates fades gently out of this life, the soul leaving the body from the feet upwards.'⁵⁹ Tarrant cites Christopher Gill in his argument for this scene's intentional fictiveness and symbolic significance:

this is not an illustration of the normal effects of hemlock poisoning, but a piece of idealistic fiction illustrating the main message of the dialogue. Socrates is released, and released without violence because he had practically released himself already.⁶⁰

The symbolism of this scene is augmented in *Phaedo*'s closing comments to his listener, in which he says, 'This, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 118a, p. 185

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 99

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

time the bravest and also the wisest and most just.’⁶¹ The moralism is clear; but it is *literary* moralising which, when viewed together with the numerous stylistic features that Plato employs to sustain and reward his audience’s contemplation, qualifies the *Phaedo* as a work of literature. It is didactic art, to be sure, but it is art nonetheless.

Thus the *Phaedo* possesses a Janus-faced double aspect. It is clear that the narrative without the explicit arguments would qualify as a work of literature *per se*. It possesses a number of elements that warrant such a characterisation: an insider’s perspective, character development, interaction and dialogue, dramatic intensity, pathos, non-technical language and stylistic devices such as the symbolism embodied in the depiction of Socrates’ death. Conversely, the bare arguments it contains, without the characterisation, stylistic devices, and dramatic intensity of its literary aspect, the text would remain a work of philosophy *per se*, and its ethical arguments would qualify it as, at least in part, a work of *moral* philosophy. Thus, as a work of literature *qua* literature, the *Phaedo* has merit; it also has merit as a work of moral philosophy *qua* moral philosophy, although not necessarily for the reasons given by Raphael. Moreover, as Raphael and Tarrant argue, the dialogue has genuine merit as a combined work of philosophy and literature. As Tarrant observes, ‘We are asked to listen to the arguments critically; we are also asked to respond to the personalities of those participating.’⁶²

Raphael is right that some works of moral philosophy can not only possess literary merit, but can also *be* works of literature. But it does not follow that *any* work of moral philosophy, however literary, can also be considered a work of literature. The *Phaedo*, like other works of Plato, is a special case, and it qualifies because it possesses a number of features common to imaginative literature while retaining the features – a reflective generality and style of argument that aims to be rationally persuasive – that

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 118a, p. 185

⁶² Tarrant, *op. cit.*, p. x

qualify it as a work of philosophy. But Plato's dialogues number among very few exceptions to the rule. The overwhelming majority of works of moral philosophy, commencing with Aristotle's up to the present day, remain works of pure philosophy, even allowing that significant literary *merit* may attach to them.

However, it is not Raphael's intention to treat the first proposition as it is treated here; that is, as the object of worthwhile reflection on a philosophically interesting point. Instead, he employs his argument that some works of philosophy can also be works of literature as evidence in support of his second proposition, that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy. He writes:

If others accept my view that some literature has an ethical dimension which strikes the eye through a novel perspective, an ethical dimension which goes beyond moralizing but is not reached by explicit argument – if they accept this, will they also agree that such literature can be called a form of moral philosophy?⁶³

The acceptance or rejection of Raphael's proposition here has a crucial bearing on the validity of his second proposition. Because to value literature for the distinctive contribution that it can make to philosophical reflection is to acknowledge a distinction between literature and philosophy, and to accord importance to the distinction itself. However, as will be argued, to accept this second proposition is to reduce one form of discourse to another form of discourse, and there are good reasons to believe that the power of the connection between philosophy and literature would be severely attenuated if this were the case.

But before proceeding to a detailed critique of this crucial second proposition, it is worth considering the third and fourth propositions to evaluate their implications for the validity of the proposition that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy.

⁶³ Raphael, *op. cit.*, p. 4

The Third Proposition: Moral Philosophy Feeds Literature

When Raphael suggests that moral philosophy can 'feed' literature, he means that moral insights gleaned via philosophical reflection can enrich the moral theme and dimension of a work of literature. These insights, the argument runs, can be embodied in the situations depicted in the work and in the actions and attitudes of its characters. While the proposition that moral philosophy can feed literature is uncontroversial, it nevertheless implies a valuable relation between the two enterprises. However, accepting this proposition does not entail, as Raphael supposes, that its validity supports the separate proposition that merely because a work of literature embodies ethical insights or issues which are derived from philosophical reflection, it qualifies as a work of moral philosophy in its own right.

Raphael selects the works of two writers as examples of works of literature whose themes or moral dimensions are clearly fed by moral philosophy. It is noteworthy that both authors are also philosophers in their own right: Iris Murdoch and Jean-Paul Sartre. Of Murdoch, he writes that some of her novels 'feed on her views as a moral philosopher in that they exemplify in imagined individuals her abstract ideas about good and evil.'⁶⁴ He posits a similar relation between Sartre's philosophy and his literary endeavour: 'Sartre likewise tries to exemplify his existentialist theory of ethics in a play like *Les Mouches* or in his novels, *La Nausée* and the unfinished *Les Chemins de la liberté*.'⁶⁵ Raphael claims a similarity between the literary works of these writers and those produced by non-philosophers yet which nonetheless contain a valuable moral dimension:

What Murdoch and Sartre are doing here has some affinity with the activity of a novelist who is not an explicit philosopher but who gives expression, in imagined characters and situations, to a moral insight.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

Here Raphael acknowledges that moral insight is not always derived solely from the arena of moral philosophy. In allowing that such insight is not the exclusive domain of the moral philosopher, he agrees with Phillips when he writes, 'Moral philosophy can clarify moral insight but it can also twist it askew.'⁶⁷ His comment chimes with Cunningham's claim that, taken to their limits, 'prominent modern ethical theories would squeeze out, ignore, or deform things that matter.'⁶⁸ Indeed, for Raphael, the more closely the moral dimension of a work of literature corresponds to the ethical ideas that feed it, the more likely it suffers from the same faults as the philosophical work which produced the ideas. He nominates both Murdoch and Sartre as producing works which, while endowed with moral significance, fail to speak fully to the heart of what matters in ethics:

If Iris Murdoch and Sartre had not been philosophers and had given their literary talents free rein without any guidance from a preconceived ethical theory, the moral tone of their fictional works might have rung more true.⁶⁹

Precisely how Raphael believes that Murdoch's and Sartre's works might have rung more true is unclear, as is the significance of this criticism to the proposition under investigation. On the one hand, he argues that moral philosophy can feed literature; on the other hand, he evaluates the works of these writers as poorer because of it. Raphael offers no elaboration of his criticism here, but he seems to hold that because moral philosophy itself fails to ring true to moral experience, the moral dimension of literary works that are closely informed by theories that emerge from moral philosophy also carry this shortcoming. If this is correct, then it raises a question concerning the import of this third proposition for the connection between literature and philosophy. If feeding literature with the moral insights generated in philosophical reflection infects that literature with the same shortcoming that limits the significance or value of the original insight, then how can this relation between the two enterprises be valuable? Stylistic and

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 2

⁶⁹ Raphael, *loc. cit.*

methodological differences aside, if connecting philosophy and literature via the 'feed' relation generates no more valuable insights than philosophical reflection itself does, then no substantive purpose is served by the connection. This criticism also implies that works that have been fed by philosophy are of lesser value to philosophical reflection than those that embody purely pretheoretical moral views or insights. The implications of this for the proposition that literature may productively feed philosophy are obvious. To an extent, Raphael's criticism of the two writers assumes a teleological view of the moral value of literature and moral philosophy. The end to which these enterprises is to be directed, and by reference to which they are to be judged, is the development and communication of moral insight. Therefore, if the moral end of literature is to communicate moral insights that ring true to human experience, and that are unavailable through philosophical reflection alone, then it follows that works which fulfil this end are the most valuable. While Hare's criterion for the relation between literature and its real-world counterpart is empirically verifiable, Raphael offers no suggestion concerning how to assess the veracity of literary embodiments of moral insight. How is one to judge how closely a work rings true to moral experience and the extent to which its proximity here is due to its being fed by moral theory?

However, his criticism of Murdoch's and Sartre's works could be grounded in their failure to achieve this end. Raphael argues that many works of literary artists who are not explicit philosophers 'manage to achieve willy-nilly what moral philosophers are after.'⁷⁰ He offers no examples of writers whose works achieve this end in his account of the third proposition. But in his defence of the second proposition, he nominates Henry Fielding and Samuel Butler as non-philosophers whose works embody the sorts of insights that moral philosophers aim to develop. But if these writers achieve 'willy-nilly' what moral philosophers are after, that is, the communication of moral insight, and if they achieve this without explicitly drawing from the reflections and conclusions of moral

philosophy, then to what extent can their works be said to have been *fed* by an explicit moral philosophy? What are the implications of this for the validity and value of the third proposition? On Raphael's account of the works of Murdoch and Sartre, the proposition seems to entail a positive relation between philosophy and literature; but if the literature is afflicted with the shortcomings that burden the explicit moral theory that feeds it, then this connection is of only limited value to the work of literature, and of no value to moral philosophy.

However, Raphael's motives here are not to articulate an objective argument for the proposition that philosophy can valuably feed literature in a way analogous to literature's feeding philosophy by contributing what is unavailable via the methods of either sole endeavour, but are inextricably linked to gaining acceptance of his second proposition. As he writes, 'The example of Sartre, unlike that of Iris Murdoch, shows the difficulty of making a firm line of distinction between proposition three and proposition two.'⁷¹

Raphael claims that Sartre's example entails a difficulty for this distinction because he wants to defend the proposition that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy. If he can show that an explicit work of literature can generate or explore moral insights, not as a result of its direct discursive or argumentative content, but for the fresh perspective it offers on moral concepts and issues, and that this perspective is as rationally persuasive as direct, explicit argument, and that it shares key aims with moral philosophy, then it is a small step to accepting that it, too, qualifies as a work of moral philosophy. This is his reason for nominating Fielding and Butler as non-philosophers whose works embody ethical insight and, as such, qualify as works of moral philosophy. But the works of Fielding and Butler either have or have not been explicitly *fed* by antecedently developed moral philosophy. If it can be shown that their works have been informed by the products of explicit moral philosophy,

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*

then this fact alone unequivocally supports the validity of the third proposition, irrespective of any other relation they may have to moral philosophy. Further, if these writer's works are more valuable as a result of this relation than they would be without it, then this vindicates the value of the connection expressed in the third proposition. On the other hand, if it is shown that the moral insights expressed in their works are not derived from antecedently developed moral philosophy, then the works of neither writer are relevant to the validity of proposition three and, as such, cannot contribute to the debate.

In illustrating the weakness of the third proposition, and how its acceptance could support his second proposition, Raphael draws a distinction between the way in which the depictions of characters and situations in Murdoch's novels are fed by her moral philosophy, and how the relation between Sartre's literary endeavour and his philosophical activities exemplifies a stronger notion of 'feeding':

Iris Murdoch draws on her philosophy as one element among others in the material she works into a novel. She does not, I think, regard her writing of novels as a way of writing moral philosophy. Sartre, on the other hand, did seem to treat the writing of plays and novels as an alternative method of conveying his philosophical notions to a wider public than would or could read his philosophical works.⁷²

This point is interesting insofar in that it embodies two distinct senses of the notion that philosophy may feed literature. However, it is also problematic for Raphael's argument. In the case of Murdoch, it is easy to see how the working of philosophical concepts or issues into her stories constitutes a form of 'feeding' without actually accepting the novels in which they appear as works of moral philosophy. This is the uncontroversial aspect of Raphael's argument, and it conforms with the view that a work of literature can usefully be fed by explicit moral philosophy.

⁷² *ibid.*

Raphael's comments on Sartre, on the other hand, imply that Sartre's literary endeavours, as opposed to his more explicit philosophical activities, additionally embodies a significant aspect of the philosophical process, rather than merely communicating its conclusions. However, the suggestion that Sartre's literary works are fed by moral philosophy in this stronger sense ignores the distinction between moral philosophy and moralism examined earlier. It was noted previously that prescription is a major function of moral philosophy and that, according to Raphael, one cannot be an adequate moral philosopher without also being a moralist. But moralising alone, insofar as this is construed as the mere communication of moral prescriptions, forms only part of the overall function of moral philosophy which must involve deep and systematic reflection on moral concepts and issues. The moralism of the *Phaedo* exemplifies this relation; but, as shown, the explicit reflections that inform its moralising also qualify it, at least in part, as a work of moral philosophy in its own right.

In communicating a preference for a certain way of life or form of character through the actions and attitudes of its characters, a work of pure literature may also include aspects of moralism. That is, it may expound a moral theme or incorporate a clear moral dimension. Indeed, works like Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and other literary modes including fables, myths and moral tales can in their entirety constitute works of moralism. Moreover, if a literary work's moral dimension is informed by the reasoning and conclusions of moral philosophy, if its characters' actions and attitudes reflect the outcomes of philosophical argument, or exemplify an ethical position, or embody the prescriptions of an ethical theory, as they often do in Murdoch's novels, then it can be said to have been fed by moral philosophy.

But, insofar as the literary work does not itself constitute the systematic endeavour to understand moral concepts, justify moral principles, and present a case for the best ways of life and forms of character, the mere communication of insights gleaned from such endeavour through the actions and attitudes of imaginary characters, while

it can be said to have been *fed* by moral philosophy, is not the same as explicitly *doing* moral philosophy. Indeed, there are obvious differences between the writings of each of the philosophers to whom Raphael refers. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, for instance, is as different a work of writing from his *La Nausée* as Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of the Good* is from her *The Severed Head*. But *Being and Nothingness* and *The Sovereignty of the Good*, while both very different in content and conclusions, share sufficient characteristics to qualify as clear cases of philosophical writing. Both of their other works, on the other hand, possess enough distinguishing features that qualify them as examples of narrative art. Therefore, while the first example of each philosopher's works is indisputably a work of philosophy, each of the second examples is clearly foremost a work of literature, irrespective of the extent to which its moral dimension has been fed by insights gleaned from the writer's philosophical activities. Nor can one argue that *La Nausée* qualifies as a work of philosophy because its moral dimension is grounded in the explicit argumentation of *Being and Nothingness*, or because through its characters it communicates some of the ideas expressed there. Despite having the same writer, they are separate texts, and each must be evaluated according to its own specific characteristics. The *Phaedo* is not a work of moral philosophy just because it is written by a moral philosopher, is about a moral philosopher, or its moralising is informed by insights developed and articulated in the explicit philosophy of the *Meno* and other texts, but because some of these insights are developed and articulated in the explicit argumentation that forms the fabric of the text. That is to say, sufficient of the text takes the *form* of explicit moral philosophy. Moreover, each mode requires a different reading approach, one primarily imaginative the other primarily critical, and their value needs to be judged against different criteria. Thus the distinction between moral philosophy and literature is evident not just in the works themselves, but also in the reading approaches required to appreciate the value and significance of works of each mode of discourse. However a work's aesthetic value is assessed, it will *not* be by reference to

validity, rigour, perspicuity, completeness and orderliness, criteria against which philosophical positions and arguments are typically evaluated. Further, in the pairs of works cited, the notion that the former may *feed* the latter is made intelligible by reference to these distinctions. From Raphael's perspective, proposition three, for all its logical dependence on a distinction between the two enterprises, risks collapsing into either proposition one or proposition two, and its validity rests entirely on there being a distinction between the two discursive modes: for the relation 'to feed' to hold, there must be a feeder and a fed. Raphael says nothing about the implications of proposition three collapsing into proposition one, but his argument for the validity of proposition two relies heavily on the third proposition's collapse. If one accepts Sartre's literary works as examples of an explicit mode of philosophy that differs from traditional conceptions of the endeavour, yet is no less philosophical for the difference, then one is committed to accepting the validity of the second proposition. However, one can support Raphael's claim that Sartre's works blur the distinction between propositions two and three only if one disallows the distinction between philosophy and literature. But this would ignore the stylistic, methodological and evaluative gulf that separates the two modes of discourse and repudiate the value of the distinction. Raphael's view of the relation between philosophy and literature in Sartre's works, I have argued, is mistaken, but his example of Murdoch is a clear instance of a writer whose fictional works are fed by moral philosophy while not in themselves constituting explicit works of moral philosophy.

The proposition that moral philosophy may feed literature is valid given a genuine distinction between philosophy and literature, and embodies a valuable possibility for the connection between the two. Indeed, numerous works of pure literature owe their moral significance to their having been fed by the reflections and conclusions of moral philosophy, and philosophy in general. For example, Angel Clare's revolution concerning the locus of moral value of Tess' past in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is all the more striking for its relation to Kant's account

of the same subject. But no necessary connection obtains between the limitations of some moral philosophy and the extent to which a work of literature which embodies its themes rings true to human experience. There is no inevitable benefit to the feed relation: a novel fed by the outcomes of moral philosophy need not be an advertisement for its conclusions. The central theme of Dickens' *Hard Times* is clearly fed by the hegemonic utilitarian thought of his day. By 'fed' here it is meant that in his novel he implicitly represents utilitarianism, as a prevailing system of thought in his time, at least in part, to demonstrate its limitations. Moreover, insofar as his characters exemplify attitudes outside the scope of utilitarian thought, the novel cannot be said to ring less true to moral experience as a result of its relation to that philosophy. Perhaps if Dickens were a utilitarian himself, and employed his writing to canvass support for the theory, then Raphael's concern would be justifiable. But Dickens was not a utilitarian, at least not of the kind typified in the Gradgrind character, and the moralism in his novel both exceeds and conflicts with a pure exposition of that theory. *Hard Times* is critically appraised as a work of literature that reveals the extent to which utilitarianism itself *fails* to ring true to moral experience.⁷³

While it may be reasonable to assume that the literary works of philosophers such as Sartre and Murdoch, insofar as they often exemplify their authors' own philosophical views, are to a greater or lesser degree *fed* by such views, the examples of Hardy and Dickens show that it is not only novels written by *bona fide* moral philosophers that are worthy of serious moral attention. Such a view ignores the large body of imaginative literature produced by creative writers who are not explicit philosophers, yet whose works clearly reflect the subject matter and conclusions of moral philosophy. Indeed, the material in any number of distinctly philosophical perspectives provides rich thematic resources for works of fiction and, as such, can be said to feed them.

⁷³ See Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*, *op. cit.*, for a detailed discussion of this view.

Jane Austen is considered by many as the apotheosis of literary treatments of moral life and the virtues. But are her literary themes explicitly *fed* by insights gleaned from moral philosophy? It is difficult to definitively answer this question. According to Tony Tanner, it is reasonable to conjecture that the writings of *bona fide* moral philosophers did provide her with some material that informs the moral dimension of her works. In particular, he argues that there is evidence that she had drawn ideas from the philosophical works of David Hume. This evidence first emerges in her first choice of a title for the novel ultimately published as *Pride and Prejudice*. It was originally to be called *First Impressions*, but this name was discarded following the publication of another book of the same title.⁷⁴ In his introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*, Tanner argues that the phrase 'first impressions' furnishes an 'important clue to a central concern for the [novel's] final version.'⁷⁵ He suggests that the notion of first impressions is invested with a significance that reveals its philosophical roots, and that it is probable that Hume's philosophy at least partly fed the novel's moral and epistemological themes:

Without for a moment suggesting that she read as much contemporary philosophy as she did fiction (although with so intelligent a woman it is scarcely impossible), I think it is worth pointing out that 'impressions' is one of the key words in David Hume's philosophy, and the one to which he gives pre-eminence as the source of our knowledge.⁷⁶

According to Hume, *all* of our ideas are derived from impressions, including those which comprise our moral knowledge.⁷⁷ Tanner develops his argument further, quoting from passages and scenes from the novel which clearly exemplify this theme. He claims that Hume's theory harmonises with *Pride and Prejudice* and that there are sufficient thematic similarities to infer some derivative relation between the views expressed in Hume's philosophical work and those explored in Austen's literature.

⁷⁴ J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Tony Tanner (ed), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 9-10.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 9

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 11

He is particularly alert to the parallels between the cognitive dispositions of Austen's characters and Hume's 'reasoner' in the *Enquiry Concerning Morals*, in which Hume writes: 'The truth is, an unexperienced reasoner could be no reasoner at all, were he absolutely unexperienced.'⁷⁸ Tanner argues:

For Jane Austen, as for Hume, man, and woman, needed to be both an experiencer and a reasoner: the former without the latter is error-prone, the latter without the former is useless if not impossible (as exemplified by Mary Bennet's sententious comments; she is *all* 'cool and disengaged' reason, and thus no reasoner at all). Both experience and reason depend upon impressions, and first impressions thus become our first steps into full human life. To overstress this may become a matter suitable for burlesque, but as a general proposition it is not inherently so.⁷⁹

What is important here is not the degree to which philosophical material may have fed the thematic concerns of Austen's literature, but that they have done so at all; for this validates the proposition that works of philosophy can feed literature. Moreover, that such works are written by non-philosophers who nonetheless productively exploit the relation, is testament to the proposition's range – its application is not limited to works of literature that embody the views of their philosopher-writers. Raphael acknowledges this feature of the proposition in his observation that some non-philosopher literary artists achieve 'will-nilly' what moral philosophers are after. A further implication of the Austen example is that, if it is accepted that philosophical views have contributed to a literary work's richness, then this is evidence not only that philosophy can feed literature, but that it can *valuably* do so.

However, accepting the validity of proposition three does not entail accepting Raphael's claim that certain examples of literature that have been fed by philosophy blur the distinction between propositions two and three. In whatever other ways the propositions differ, they fundamentally differ in terms of the conditions required to obtain in order for each to hold.

⁷⁷ David Hume, *op. cit.*, *passim*

⁷⁸ Hume, cited by Tanner in Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 13

While the validity of proposition three depends on a certain logical relation between discrete forms of activity, proposition two rejects this distinction and proposes that an identity relation between philosophy and literature is exemplified in certain works. The relation between the two propositions is disjunctive. Either a work of literature is *fed* by philosophy (proposition three), or it *is* a work of philosophy (proposition two).⁸⁰ But in no way can the validity of the second proposition be derived from the third. To say that Murdoch's literary works are fed by her views as a moral philosopher, and that this instantiates the third proposition is one thing. But to argue in the case of Sartre that the strength of the 'feed' relation between his philosophical views and his literary endeavour qualifies his literature as philosophy, and thus blurs the distinction between the two propositions, is wrong. It may blur the distinction between philosophy and literature, but it does not blur the distinction between the two *propositions*; they remain distinct irrespective of the status of the examples employed to illustrate them. Rather, it applies a different proposition to the work in question. To claim that a certain literary work qualifies as a work of philosophy because of the way in which it has been fed by philosophy, if this even makes sense, is to claim that the second proposition, not the third, applies to it, and that it is a case of literature *as* philosophy. It makes no sense to say that a work of philosophy can be fed by philosophy, other than in the ordinary sense in which philosophers whose work engages with the works of other philosophers can be said to have been fed by those works. But this construal does not describe a relation between two distinct enterprises. Rather, it describes a relation between activities *within* a particular enterprise. In this case, it describes philosophy's traditional *modus operandi*, in which philosophers often develop, refine, refute or otherwise engage with the ideas of their predecessors and contemporaries. Indeed, Raphael himself, in another work, acknowledges that this form of activity is basic to

⁷⁹ Austen, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Or, as shown, in the case of the first proposition, it can be both literature and philosophy; but that is a separate proposition.

philosophy's 'three related purposes, analysis, synthesis and improvement of concepts.'⁸¹ But acknowledging that certain works of literature are partially informed by, or engage with, material gleaned from moral philosophy, and that this connection enriches these works' thematic concerns and enhances their literary merit, entails accepting the existence of a distinction between philosophy and literature. And *this* is the distinction that is blurred by a certain construal of proposition three to support Raphael's arguments for the validity of the proposition two, that a work of literature can be a work of philosophy. However, as with the first proposition, the conclusions drawn from arguments supporting this third proposition, insofar as the distinction between literature and philosophy is a necessary condition for its validity, cannot lend weight to the second proposition, and Raphael's case to this effect must fail.

The distinction between philosophy and literature also underpins the fourth proposition, which Raphael claims expresses the most valuable and enriching possibility for the connection between philosophy and literature, and which constitutes the central argument of this thesis. Before analysing the implications of Raphael's second proposition, it is worth reviewing the discussion concerning the relation between literature and philosophy described in the fourth, and clarifying how it bears on the validity of the proposition that a work of literature can also be a work of philosophy.

The Fourth Proposition: Literature feeds Moral Philosophy

Raphael's fourth proposition for the connection between literature and moral philosophy has already been discussed in previous chapters. As we saw, Raphael offers two meanings for the term 'feed' in the context of his fourth proposition. The first meaning entails a chiefly cognitive role for literature in philosophy. This account fits with Robert Sharpe's suggestion that what literature does is 'offer us imaginary scenes, concentrated and

⁸¹ D. D. Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy* 2nd edn., (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 16

complex settings, in which imaginary beings act.'⁸² For Sharpe, this relation is valuable because, 'from literature I may learn about individual human propensities and peculiarities.'⁸³ In terms of the fourth proposition, literature is a valuable adjunct to moral philosophy because it can clarify how these propensities and peculiarities relate to the prescriptions of ethical theory. Throughout this thesis, this explanation of the role for literature in ethical reflection has been called 'the propositional account.' The second meaning considered by Raphael of the notion that literature can feed philosophy entails that some effect is produced in the reader's moral outlook: 'But to say that literature feeds moral philosophy can also mean that literature may stimulate a philosophical perception which otherwise might have been missed.'⁸⁴ This meaning is in line with Sharpe's claim that, for literature to bring real change in one's moral outlook, it 'must move and involve us,'⁸⁵ and echoes Nussbaum's claim that novel reading can 'develop moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent.'⁸⁶ To an extent, both meanings interpenetrate and, where they overlap, I have endeavoured to offer some explanation of the role and value of their connection.

Of the first meaning, Raphael writes: 'If someone says that literature feeds moral philosophy, he may mean that the characters or situations in a work of literature can be used as evidence for some issues in moral philosophy.'⁸⁷ On this account, literature can reveal or elucidate facts concerning the ethical life that have relevant implications for the truth value, plausibility or practical application of propositions contained in a body of moral philosophy. The propositional account embodies Beardsmore's claim that literary representations of moral problems, situations and possibilities can valuably be employed to 'illustrate and test

⁸² Robert Sharpe, "Literature and philosophy" in Honderich, *Op. cit.*, p. 525

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Raphael, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Sharpe, *loc. cit.*

⁸⁶ Nussbaum, *op. cit.* p. 12

⁸⁷ Raphael, *loc. cit.*

our philosophical theories.⁸⁸ Thus the significance of literature to philosophical reflection flows from what it can reveal about ethics and ethical theory and its value derives, at least in part, from its ability to augment moral philosophy's endeavour to present the best ways of life and forms of character. While all forms of literature and narrative art are valuable in this respect, the novel, with its emphasis on character, plot, complexity, and attention to detail, appears as the most valuable. Nussbaum maintains that novels and novel-reading provide 'insights that should play a role ... in the construction of an adequate moral and political theory.'⁸⁹

Much of this thesis has investigated Raphael's claim that proposition four expresses the 'most obvious, the richest, and the most satisfying' relationship between moral philosophy and literature.⁹⁰ To see why, and to clarify its implications for the second proposition, it is useful to recapitulate the discussion so far.

Concerning the connection between literature and moral philosophy envisaged in the fourth proposition, it has been argued that the concrete detail in imaginative literature, when incorporated into ethical reflection, can elicit, illuminate, clarify and test the implications of a moral theory. In supplementing the 'cool head' of philosophical reflection with the imaginative faculty, literature can help philosophy by revealing possibilities of moral seriousness that may be unavailable via the general and abstract preoccupations of purely rational inquiry. As Norris argues, literature:

is able to show us that in any given situation there may pertain important features that are unique and do not fall within the ambit of some clearly defined principle.⁹¹

As argued in chapter three, the scene from *Heart of Darkness* can effectively illustrate one of the foundational aspects of Kant's ethical theory, his notion

⁸⁸ Beardsmore, *loc. cit.*

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, *loc. cit.*

⁹⁰ Raphael, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ Norris, *op. cit.*, p. 19

of respect for human dignity. The workers are clearly suffering from the consequences of being used merely as means to the end of 'this or that will in its discretion.'⁹² It was argued that whether this circumstance was actually the result of a certain mode of moral reasoning is not vital to the scene's ethical significance. That it is *conceivably* the product of such reasoning is sufficient and, as such, it can be seen to represent the iniquitous consequence of a certain ethical perspective. But contemplating the scene in the light of Kant's theory also reveals a number of issues that require more comprehensive examination, such as his account of the value of inclinations such as sympathy and benevolence. The moral importance of these dispositions was illustrated by Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Bennett's commentary on Huck's decision not to give Jim the slave up to his 'rightful owners.' As an illustration, then, the scene from *Heart of Darkness* not only illuminates and clarifies an important aspect of Kantian ethics, but it also alerts the reader to issues the resolution of which may be progressed by further engagement with literature. As shown, an examination of Marlow's natural sympathy with the workers in light of Huck Finn's intuitive morality reveals how at least one aspect of Kantian ethics fails to accommodate an important human propensity and, as such, fails to ring true to moral experience.

Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, was used to test an ethical perspective. The non-utilitarian sees the dilemma posed by Ivan's challenge as a clash between general happiness and the rights of the innocent, and as a dilemma that cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of utility. The act utilitarian, on the other hand, sees no dilemma at all in Ivan's challenge. As Graham explains, provided that it can be shown that the balance of general good over individual loss has been properly described, then it 'as clear as anything' that we should sacrifice the innocent.⁹³ However, it was argued that, irrespective of the strength of any pragmatic case for the torture, for those with deep convictions that torturing the innocent is

⁹² AK 4: 428

⁹³ Graham, 1990, *loc. cit.*

wrong, nothing can make it *morally right* to do so. Examining the Greatest Happiness Principle in light of Ivan's challenge reinforces Midgley's view that theories which, when acted on, have obviously iniquitous consequences are bad theories and must be changed to accommodate our reasonable and deep-seated convictions, or else rejected. The rule utilitarian's variation of the theory entails a conception of justice which comports with our convictions concerning the plight of the workers in *Heart of Darkness*, and which, at least superficially, accommodates Ivan's challenge. But as shown, Ivan's challenge ultimately confronts the rule utilitarian with a difficulty that the theory cannot accommodate. The scene from *Sophie's Choice* was employed to show that, while the extreme dilemma represented Ivan's challenge is a heuristic device intended to test an ethical theory at the limits of imagination, horrid dilemmas are within the bounds of human possibility. The scene depicting Sophie's encounter with the Nazi doctor, and her subsequent choice of which of her two children must die, represents a moral situation that is not only possible, but is the kind of situation *known* to have prevailed in recent history. To paraphrase Graham, we do not need to believe that an actual woman named Sophie was made to choose between her two children; it is enough to know that her dilemma represents the kind of situation that actually occurred during the Nazi's reign. This knowledge is sufficient to demand that our ethical theories be sensitive to the influences of the emotions on making ethical choices, and in particular to the primacy people typically accord to intimate attachments. It also highlights the extremes to which ethical monsters are prepared to act, and furnishes some clues as to how the implementation of ethical theory in public morality may help to identify and contend with such persons. But if key aspects of Kantian ethics and utilitarianism are shown, with the aid of literary examples, to ring false to genuine moral experience, what philosophical approach to ethics is required? In examining the actions and attitudes of the bishop of Digne in Hugo's *Les Miserables*, it was argued that virtue theory, which embraces traits and dispositions that are highly valued, comes closer to speaking to

the heart of what matters. This is especially true when virtue theory employs the aid of literature to furnish depictions of characters that exemplify virtuous actions, ways of life and forms of character.

However, the value of this connection between moral philosophy and literature, especially if it is to be exploited to overcome some of the limitations inherent in rational argument, is fully dependent on there being a distinction between the two enterprises. As D. H. Lawrence writes, books are not life, they are only 'tremulations on the ether.'⁹⁴ For Lawrence, however, the novel occupies a special place in the literary corpus: 'But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. Which is more than poetry, philosophy, science or any other book-tremulation can do.'⁹⁵ While this tremulation will be tempered by the cool head of philosophical analysis, this possibility for engagement and identification with literary characters and their ethical situations warrants the incorporation of literature into ethical reflection to expand one's understanding of the significance and implications of ethical theory, something unavailable through traditional philosophical reflection alone. If philosophical analysis has shortcomings that limit its ability to speak to the heart of what matters, and if we are to employ one form of discourse to supplement, to correct the shortcomings of, another form of discourse, then it makes no sense at all to reduce the corrective to that which requires correction. However, this is the implication in Raphael's second proposition, that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy.

The Second Proposition: Literature as Philosophy

Raphael's conclusions on the implications of the first and third propositions fail to support the second proposition, that a work of literature can also be a work of philosophy. Moreover, the value of the relation entailed in the

⁹⁴ D. H. Lawrence, cited in Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel*, 2nd Ed., (London: Macmillan, 1979). p. 11

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

fourth proposition depends on a distinction between the two enterprises. For this second proposition to succeed, therefore, it must do so independently of how the other relations between literature and philosophy are construed.

In arguing for the validity of the second proposition, Raphael places a caveat on his claim, 'the question of whether literature can be moral philosophy depends on what we are prepared to call moral philosophy.'⁹⁶ For Raphael, then, the question is at least partly decided by reference to moral philosophy's proper definition. While Raphael's caveat is crucial to his account of the second proposition, I am here less concerned with the details of his argument than with its general stance on the relation between literature and moral philosophy. If the stance is unsound, then any position that flows from it will be problematic.

Raphael claims that two features serve to qualify a work of literature as a work of moral philosophy. In 'presenting an argument by means of a ... novel perspective,' he claims, a work of literature can, first, engage with a philosophical position and, second, share its aim with moral philosophers.⁹⁷ He argues that literature can sharpen moral insight, a clear aim of moral philosophy, and that 'what matters is the recognition that some literature does have this function and so has a degree of resemblance to moral philosophy.'⁹⁸ He reasons that works of literature that share this function and bear this resemblance can be regarded also as works of moral philosophy. To an extent, Raphael's case for the second proposition's validity is grounded in a teleological view of moral philosophy. This view informs his notion of moral philosophy as that activity whose definition is constitutive of the end towards which it is directed, the sharpening of moral insight. Therefore, if a work of literature shares the same end as

⁹⁶ Raphael, *op. cit.* p. 4

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 12

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 6

moral philosophy, the sharpening of moral insight, and in so doing resembles moral philosophy, then that work qualifies as a work of moral philosophy.

For example, if we were to resolve that certain moral insights can be sharpened by contemplating the ethically significant aspects of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and if it can be shown that the novel engages with a philosophical position, then there is a case for accepting Hardy's novel as a work of moral philosophy. For *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the issue is straightforward and easy to resolve. Close reflection on Tess' actions and her relations with Clare and D'Urberville certainly helps to sharpen insights concerning the complexity of ethical judgement and its possible consequences. The novel's central theme of redemption clearly engages with an established philosophical position. On Raphael's teleological account, then, the novel qualifies as a work of moral philosophy.

What is the role of intentionality here? Is the novel meant to be a work of moral philosophy or is it accidentally so, its status ascribed by reference to the possible fruits of its reading coincidentally overlapping with the aims of moral philosophy? Can we ascribe a genuine *telos* without intention or design? Are Hardy's explicit aims in writing *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* to make a case for the best way of life or form of character, to facilitate the sharpening of moral insight, to offer compelling reasons to act or live one way rather than another and so to qualify his novel as a work of moral philosophy? In short, is *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* intended as a work of rational persuasion? The answer to this question is no. Hardy's contention that the novel is an impression rather than an argument is a clear expression of his lack of intention in this regard.⁹⁹ In presenting an impression of complex life from a unique perspective, explicit rational persuasion is incidental to the novel's aims. However, intentionality seems

⁹⁹ Hardy, *loc. cit*

not to be a deciding feature for Raphael's teleological explanation. Recall his earlier comment that some 'literary artists manage to achieve willy-nilly what moral philosophers are after.'¹⁰⁰ This implies that the authors to whom he refers may not always set out with the express aim of persuading their readers to accept certain normative conclusions, and that their works are not always directed towards some explicit philosophical position or goal. What is important for Raphael is not intention or design, but that these works engage with an ethical position, reveal a new ethical perspective and sharpen moral insight, all functions of moral philosophy and, according to Raphael, constitutive of its aims. How the novel arrives at these insights, and the extent to which its methods in doing so differ from moral philosophy's own traditional methods, is less important than the effectiveness with which these insights are communicated to the reader. This stance is evident in his claim concerning the products of moral philosophy:

Moral philosophy which contains clever and impeccable logical argument but adds nothing to moral insight can be valuable as a piece of applied logic but is not, in my judgement, a distinguished piece of moral philosophy.¹⁰¹

This comment serves to amplify his teleological account of moral philosophy and emphasises the weight he ascribes to outcomes. Moral philosophy is not only defined by reference to its aims and functions, it is also evaluated according to the success with which they are achieved or fulfilled. However, insofar as it entails that moral philosophy's definition depends on the quality of its outcomes, however construed, this view is problematic. There is nothing in the definition of an activity that requires that the activity successfully fulfil its function. A work of moral philosophy can be bad in many ways, it can be irrelevant, irreverent and specious, but

¹⁰⁰ Raphael, *op. cit.*, p. 2

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p. 5

this does not disqualify it as moral philosophy. A process cannot be defined solely by reference to the quality of its outcome. For instance, if I am a house painter I am one by reference to more than merely the quality or volume of my output. In addition to my aims, there is a process involved, and this process helps to define my role and function as a house painter: stripping old paint, washing surfaces, filling gaps and other such preparations, choosing and mixing new colours, selecting brushes and rollers, applying the coats of paint in the required order, waiting for each to dry before the next one is applied. House painting is defined by reference to some or all of these activities. I can be a poor house painter, a sloppy workman and have no eye for colour or shade, but provided that my activities are consistent with these processes, I am a house painter nonetheless. To be sure, part of what defines my role as a house painter is entailed in what I set out to achieve, in what function I try to fulfil, but my aims are not wholly constitutive of a definition of my activity. The same applies for philosophy. Regardless of how compelling my arguments, defining my activities as a moral philosophy is constitutive of the process in which I am engaged. This process was discussed in chapter one, and it involves evaluating and sorting moral claims, clarifying moral terms and concepts and generally arguing for a certain ethical position. That Raphael himself accepts this as the proper definition of moral philosophy emerges in his account of philosophy advanced in another of his works, in which he states quite clearly that the main tradition of western philosophy has two connected aims, which he describes as: '(a) the clarification of concepts, for the purpose of (b) the critical evaluation of beliefs.'¹⁰² This account reflects the more generally accepted view of moral philosophy as a process, and does not rely merely on the nature or quality of its outcomes for a definition. This account also clearly accommodates the distinction between

¹⁰² Raphael (1990) *op. cit.*

literature and moral philosophy. While the concepts instantiated in a novel may well enhance a philosophical exploration of these concepts and sharpen insights concerning their real world applications, the literary instantiation of these concepts is not itself constitutive of an activity that may be defined as the critical exposition of these concepts in the same way as philosophy may be defined.

The problem of definition aside, Raphael is not the sole occupant of the position that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy. Nussbaum claims that certain novels that are deeply philosophical, or else make an important contribution to moral philosophy, may themselves be considered examples of literature as moral philosophy.¹⁰³ She claims that a novel's philosophical status is attained, at least in part, by reference to its moral insight and its ability to communicate this to its readers. In her commentary on Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*, she argues:

the views uncovered in this text derive their power from the way in which they emerge as the ruminations of such a high and fine mind concerning the tangled mysteries of these [the characters] imaginary lives.¹⁰⁴

But do the facts that a novel was written by 'a high and fine mind,' expresses its author's insights, and furnishes a detailed depiction of the tangled mysteries of experience moral philosophy qualify it as a work of moral philosophy? Nussbaum believes so, and claims that, insofar as it is the task of moral philosophy to 'search for a specification of the good life for a human being,'¹⁰⁵ literary texts which help to enhance our ethical understanding in this regard ought to be included in the endeavour. Her conclusion is consistent with Raphael's second proposition. Nussbaum argues that some novelists can 'state...truths' about the ethical life that

¹⁰³ Nussbaum, 1990, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-127

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 141

escape philosophical discourse and that, as a result of their ability to communicate these truths, '...certain novels are irreplaceably works of moral philosophy.'¹⁰⁶ She argues that James' novel is a clear example of such a work:

Insofar as the goal of moral philosophy is to give us understanding of the human good through a scrutiny of alternative conceptions of the good, this text and others like it would then appear to be important parts of this philosophy.¹⁰⁷

Nussbaum's approach here is not new. Indeed, it follows a long tradition of literary and philosophical discourse which finds perhaps its consummate expression in the writings of Rene Descartes who, in *Discourse on Method*, observes:

...to read good books is like holding a conversation with the most eminent minds of past centuries and, moreover, a studied conversation in which these authors reveal to us only the best of their thoughts.¹⁰⁸

But this stance is problematic. If literature can make a distinctive contribution to ethical reflection, then this contribution is at least partly dependent on its distinctiveness. However, as shown, literature's distinctiveness is due to the unity of its form and content. To value a work of literature for the message it communicates is to assume the separability of form and content, that is, of the 'valuable' message from the medium through which it is communicated. This dovetails with the doctrine that art is essentially (and principally valuable as) a form of communication, and fits with Raphael's teleological account. Budd observes of the doctrine that it requires:

an artist to create a work of art with the intention of communicating something to a particular individual or group of

¹⁰⁵ Nussbaum (1990), *op. cit.*, p. 142

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 148

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 30

people or with the hope that somebody will experience the work and understand its message.¹⁰⁹

The stance that literature's contribution to ethical reflection lies solely in its message implies that value attaches to literature principally as a form of cognitive communication and, as such, implicitly rejects the unity of form and content. Budd argues that there are serious negative implications for treating a work of literature merely as a vehicle for some message: 'For the distinction between vehicle and message intrinsic to the concept of communication means that for any message there are in principle many vehicles capable of communicating that message.'¹¹⁰ On this account, to value a work of literature merely for the message it communicates reduces it to a means of communicating that message and accords little value to the way it is communicated. Thus, a captioned photograph of the Congolese workers is in principle equally capable of communicating the moral significance of their predicament as the scene from *Heart of Darkness*. A diary entry reporting Stephen Dedalus' temptation and ultimate surrender is equally capable of revealing his anguish as the scene from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. A statistical representation of the scale of the Holocaust is equally capable of conveying its horror as *Sophie's Choice*. However, none of these alternative modes of communication can equally elicit the emotional engagement that makes the literary mode so valuable to ethical reflection. Nor, as argued earlier, can these modes furnish the extensive freedoms required to exploit the opportunities for ethical reflection offered by imaginative literature.

While Raphael's acceptance of the unity of form and content is implicit in his argument that how the story is told is as important as the story itself, divorcing content from form is a natural consequence of treating literature as philosophy. Isolating and sorting moral propositions

¹⁰⁹ Budd, *op. cit.*, p. 175 (n14).

is integral to the process of moral philosophy. Indeed, a necessary step in the philosophical analysis of concepts and beliefs is extracting what is being said from the way in which it is communicated. A similar objection obtains to Nussbaum's treatment of Henry James' novels as the musings of a high and fine mind. It may be that James' novels represent the musings of a high and fine mind, and that they deserve a *place* in moral philosophy's scrutiny of the good life, but to regard his novels as works of explicit moral philosophy is to isolate the propositions contained in his musings and subject his conceptions of the good to the kind of critical scrutiny that she herself assigns as a function of moral philosophy. This is not the function of literature, but of explicit moral philosophy. Her claim that 'a goal of moral philosophy is to give us some understanding of the human good through a scrutiny of alternative conceptions of the good' implies a distinction between the concepts and their scrutiny. A literary presentation of an alternative conception of the good is not the same thing as an analysis of that conception of the good. Nussbaum's argument that works which furnish an impression of these concepts are irreplaceably works of moral philosophy ignores this distinction.

The point is not that novels cannot communicate ethical messages, that their messages cannot be subjected to critical scrutiny, or that value cannot be ascribed thereby. The point is rather that the way its message is communicated, and how the reader grasps it, is what makes the novel valuable to ethical reflection. Reducing a novel to the sum of its moral propositions and their logical relations necessarily deprives it of the unique and irreducible contribution to ethical reflection endowed by the unity of its form and content. While Budd's objection to the communication doctrine expressly concerns artistic value, it applies equally well to this argument, that the whole of the work is valuable, as a whole:

¹¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 15

It is, of course, true that what a work of art communicates can be *integral* to its value as a work of art, for it may be integral to the experience that work offers. But it is the message *as communicated by the work*, the message *as realized in the experience of the work*, that determines the work's artistic value, not the message itself.¹¹¹

Budd's argument mirrors Cunningham's on the status of literature's message and its value to ethical reflection:

When literature succeeds at conveying ethical insights, it does so not simply by telling us something that can be understood in some cognitive sense distinct from our emotional resources. Rather, literature works by helping us to see, which is just as much a matter of feeling our way to clearer apprehension.¹¹²

He does not mean that an insightful novel will simply depict its characters' emotions as objects for the reader's contemplation. Rather, he draws from Aristotle's notion that right feeling is essential to right judgement and, ultimately, good character and right living, and argues, 'because of the way it is told, the story itself will elicit emotions in the reader, and such emotions are a constitutive part of ethical judgement.'¹¹³ As the generation of emotional responses to literary situations is a function of the unity of form and content, Cunningham's argument implicitly rejects the communication model with its required distinction between form and content. He writes:

By helping us to feel along with and for the characters engaged in the often complex, perplexing, vexing business of living, a novel's style effectively blurs the conceptual line between style and content.¹¹⁴

Cunningham's position gels with John Dewey's idea that an artwork's meaning is embedded in the medium of its expression, is imaginatively invoked, engages the emotions and, insofar as it interacts with a self, precludes the kind of disembodied analysis required to isolate the message

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Cunningham, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 86

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

from the vehicle.¹¹⁵ Both of these positions dovetail with the stance developed in this thesis. The sympathetic world view furnished by contemplating ethical issues from the perspectives of Marlow, Stephen Dedalus, Tess Durbeyfield, Angel Clare, Alyosha Karamazov and Sophie, the stories of whom, *as narrated*, do more than simply enumerate a number of ethically significant propositions, can lead to a more acute awareness of possibilities of moral seriousness, and the complexity of moral judgement, than pure rational reflection can.

As argued throughout this thesis, the opportunities for a more thorough understanding of ethics through the imaginative engagement with literary situations of moral seriousness are unavailable through reflection on Kant's, Mill's or other philosophical texts alone. However, nor are quite the same opportunities made available by treating Conrad's, Joyce's, Achebe's, Lawrence's and Hardy's literature as anything other than it is. So much of the novel's value in this capacity resides in the irreducible nature of its form. The significance of the whole of the text is in the sum of the literary devices it contains; it is in its language and in its symbolism, enmeshed in its metaphorical representations of life, its themes and its subject matter. In the novel, and in other forms of imaginative literature, form and content unite to endow the text with substantive meaning. And its value is even embedded in the ambiguities that are such rich sources for reflection, which prompted Henry James to declare some novels as 'loose and baggy monsters.' If an over-emphasis on perspicuity can become a shortcoming of philosophical reflection, then it seems that the loose and baggy monstrosity of the novel can provide, if applied with diligence, an ideal corrective.

The power of this contribution would be undermined if we were to uncritically accept Raphael's proposition that a work of literature can also be a work of philosophy. As I have sought to establish, the value of the connection between literature and moral philosophy lies, at least in part, in

¹¹⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Perigree, 1980), p. 273 *passim*.

the distinction between the two enterprises. If we are to employ one form of discourse to supplement another form of discourse, then it makes no sense to reduce the supplement to that which requires supplementing. Accepting the proposition that a work of literature can also be a work of moral philosophy requires treating the literary work in the same way as we would a work of moral philosophy. And that means reducing it to the sum of its unadorned propositions and their relations so as to subject it to the same forms of clarification and analysis appropriate to the normative conclusions of a philosophical argument. This cannot be done without treating the fundamental constitution of the text as something that it is not. If all that a novel can *show* us about the ethical can be reduced to the sum of what it *says* about the ethical, then it might possibly qualify as a work of moral philosophy. But then we would not be dealing with the loose and baggy monster that has been shown to enrich our ethical reflection by furnishing the opportunities for unique perspectives and experiences. Indeed, after paraphrasing the work so as to isolate and evaluate its ethical propositions, we would then find ourselves back where we started, only to repeat the cycle – honing the work to an abstract general moral argument so that we can validate its prescriptions, only to find that it fails to engage our real ethical concerns.

When I argue that a novel ought not to be treated as a work of moral philosophy, I do not mean to suggest that it cannot be deeply philosophical and valued for the moral insights it furnishes. What makes many novels great is that they are deeply philosophical; that they manage, whether through the writer's ability to convey profound moral insight, or by a reader's application and inference, to reveal something important about our particular or universal ethical concerns, is testament to their philosophical depth and import.

The argument here is that the value of a work of imaginative literature resides in the irreducible unity of its form and content. If a work of literature is to be of substantive value in the narrowly circumscribed context of normative ethics, then it must be allowed to show us, and we

must be allowed to see, and to feel, the significance of the moral issues it represents. It cannot enrich our ethical perspectives in this way if it is reduced to a mere sum of abstract propositions. Conversely, treating moral philosophy as irredeemably flawed because it cannot represent complex lived reality in the same fashion as imaginative literature not just ignores philosophy's practical aim, it also misses the point of the marriage between the two. In this respect, the difference between the two enterprises and their relative benefits is crucial. What constitutes bringing philosophical reflection to novel reading? According to Cunningham, this is 'simply a case of bringing care, diligence, and orderliness to thinking about what a particular novel's answer would be to Socrates' "How should one live?"¹¹⁶ This is not to suggest that the novel will furnish a direct answer to ethical questions. As argued earlier, it would be seriously counterproductive to accept the propositions of literature as uncriticized foundations for a case for life. Indeed, the distinction between the two enterprises assumes a distinction between the object and process of philosophical analysis. To achieve the kind of systematic understanding of the good life aimed at by moral philosophy, we will always need cool-headed philosophical analysis to sort and evaluate moral propositions, no matter what their source or how they are communicated. On the subject of philosophical style Murdoch writes:

I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it...when the philosopher is as it were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold clear recognizable voice.¹¹⁷

Murdoch identifies two functions in moral philosophy's endeavour. First, it is an 'attempt to perceive and to tease out of thought our deepest and most general concepts' and, second, it constitutes 'the critical analysis of

¹¹⁶ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 87

¹¹⁷ Murdoch in Magee, *op. cit.*, p. 231

beliefs.¹¹⁸ As she understands it, philosophy is abstract, discursive and direct, and valuable for these traits.¹¹⁹ However, when the cold, clear recognisable voice of philosophical analysis rings untrue to a certain aspect of lived moral experience, literature may be employed to supplement philosophy's function. The argument is that contemplating the actions and attitudes of literary characters, their consequences and their relations with other characters, and reflecting on how these may apply to ethical experience, will deepen our understanding of ethics and ethical theory.

In *The Sovereignty of the Good*, Murdoch writes that a meritorious moral philosophy is one which 'at least professes and tries to be a philosophy that one could live by.'¹²⁰ She argues that above all, moral philosophy should be inhabited.¹²¹ The thrust of this project has been to show that while the philosophical method carves out a conceptual space in which ethical concepts may be sorted, clarified and analysed, literature helps to make that space inhabitable. In so doing, literature augments, but does not replace, moral philosophy's proper endeavour to present a comprehensive and compelling case for the best ways of life and forms of character for creatures like us.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 233

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 236

¹²⁰ Murdoch, *op. cit.*, p. 47

¹²¹ *ibid.*

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